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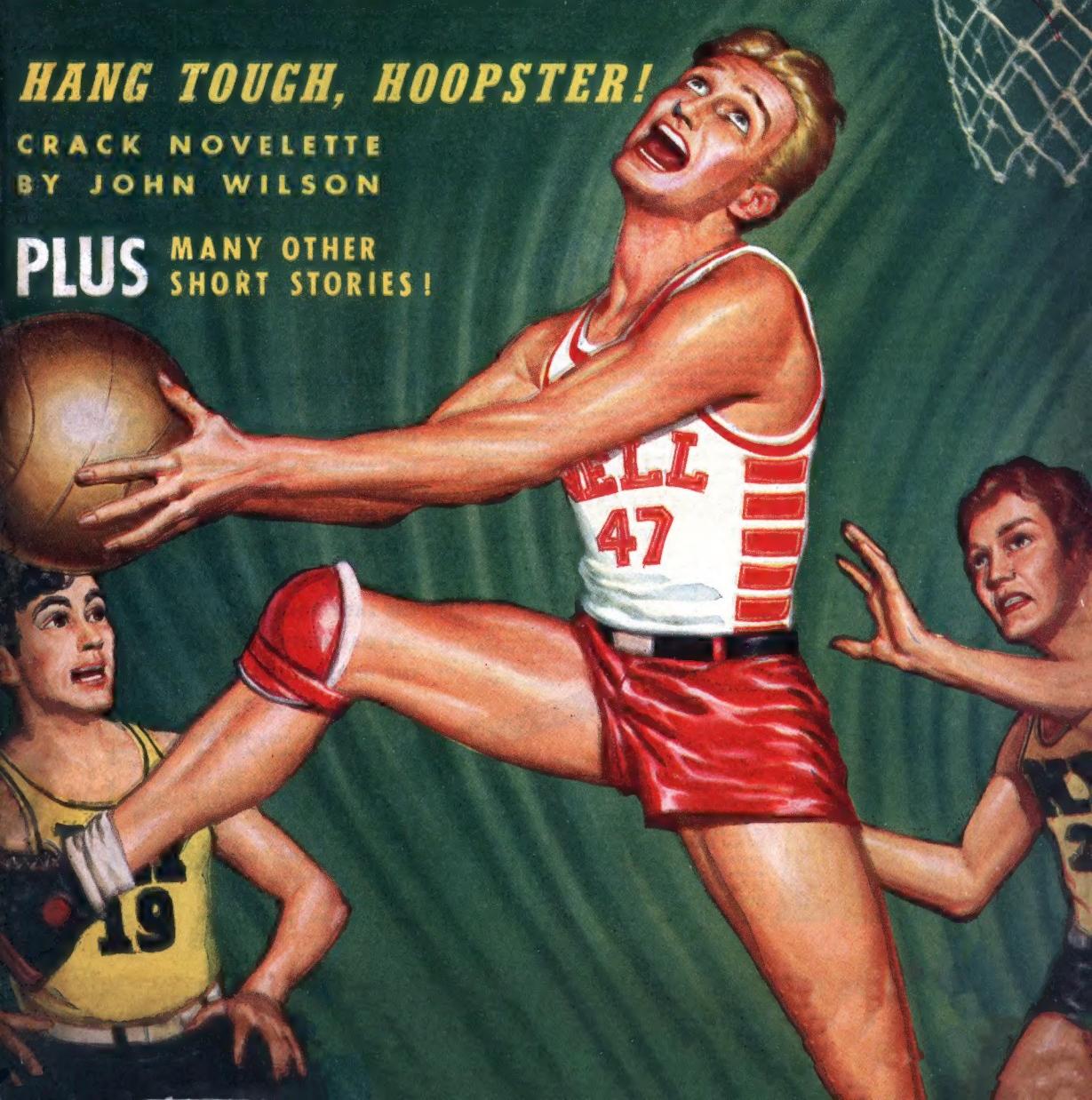
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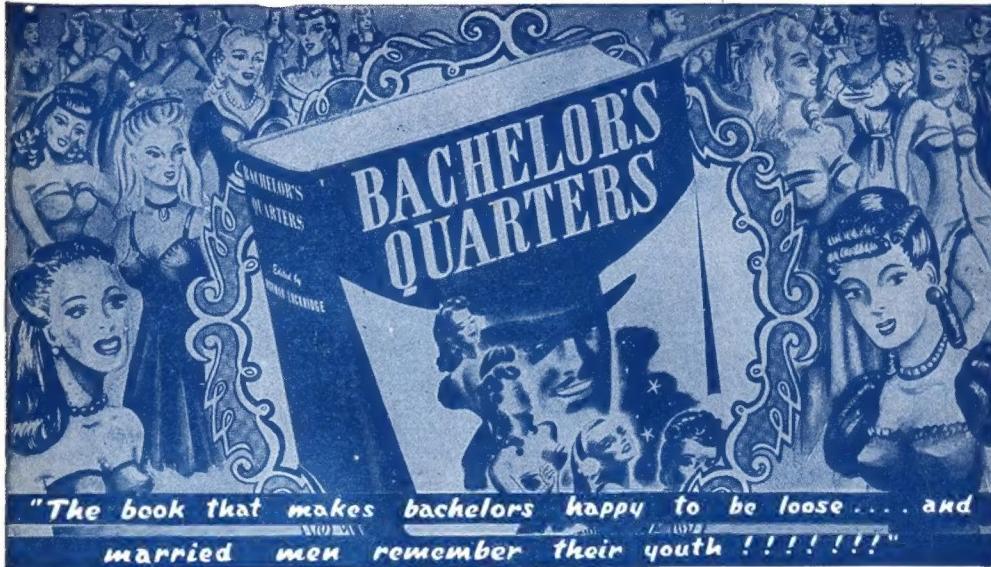
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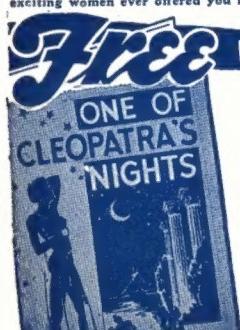
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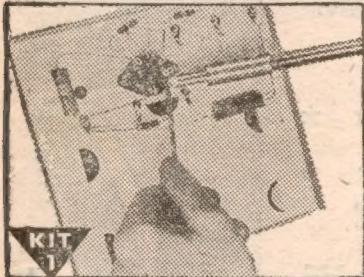
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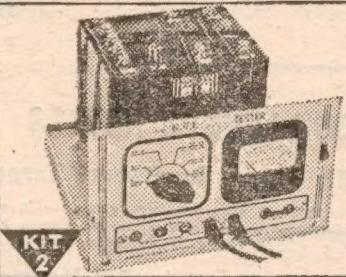
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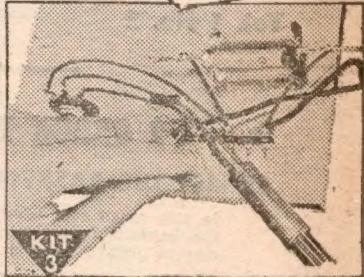
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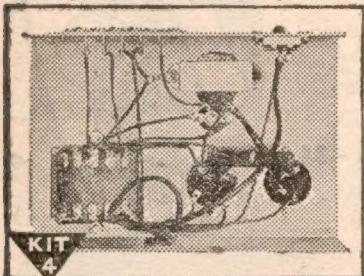
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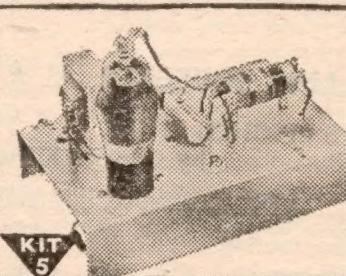
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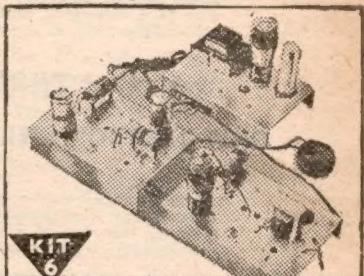
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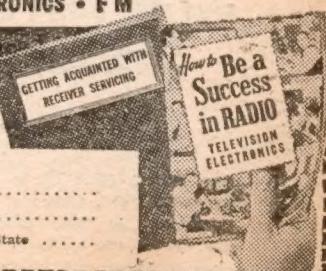
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Vol. 1 No. 2

Winter

★ ★ 2 CRACK BOOK-LENGTH NOVELS ★ ★

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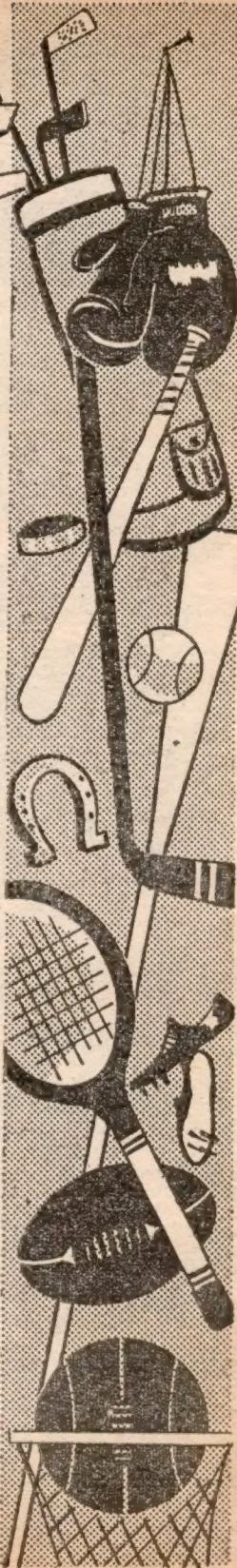
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"There was one man be-
tween him and the back-
board — Al Dorberman!"

BRIMSTONE BASKETEER

CHAPTER I

THE BIG memorial Armory in the center of town was jam-packed to the eaves. The balcony and the indoor running track

that curved around it were wedged tight with folding chairs, most of them holding two spectators, and in the space behind the chairs standees were sardined back against the wall. The bleachers set up on the main floor around the court were built to

In this tough coal town, basketball was no mere game—it was the battlefield of rival industrial empires, the arena where rich clashed with poor, the ring where bitter feuds were fought!



BY
**ROBERT
TURNER**

hold three thousand. They held six tonight. All told, nearly eleven thousand basketball-happy fans crammed the huge Armory. Outside, the overflow mob blocked the street, listening to a play-by-play broadcast of this important play-off League game between the hometown Rock City Rogues and the Pittsmont Puddlers.

All during the last half, the walls of the Armory had echoed with the continual uproar of sound that followed play after daring play. If the Rogues took this game, they'd be tied at the top of the League with the Westside Dukes, and if both teams stuck to the top for the balance of the season, the final championship play-off for the Mining State League would take place right here in Rock City. And an intra-city championship series would put the town plunk in the center of the whole country's winter sports spotlight.

With five minutes of the last period to go, the Armory crowd-roar suddenly cut off. A tomb-like silence followed for a second as every man-jack and girl in the crowd held his breath, clenched his fists and watched goggle-eyed for the nerve-wracking heartbeat of time it took for the ball to leave Babe Hamilton's huge hands and arch through space toward the Puddler's basket. It was a terrific shot, almost a foolhardy one. But Babe had been forced to do it.

He'd been stuck, midcourt, right at the sideline, with a Puddler guard rushing him from each side, blocking a toss to either of the two Rogue men who were clear. The other three Rogue basketeers were well covered. In a shaved second of indecision, Babe Hamilton had made his choice. It was to try to dribble clear and take a chance on having the ball stolen by one of the charging enemy guards, or making a bet on a wonder shot. He took the latter.

He watched one of the Puddler guards make a mighty leap in vain to block the shot. He watched the ball soar through the bright lights. He heard the sudden pall of silence break as the crowd of hometown fans released its collective breath in a long groan as they saw that the shot wasn't

quite going to sink clean, was going to be a sliver of an inch short.

BABE HAMILTON felt his heart leaping against his ribs as he watched the ball hit the outer rim of the basket. And then his tired arms and legs relaxed. A grin replaced the frozen tenseness that had been on his large and craggy features. The forward spin he'd put on the ball hopped it up over the basket and against the glass backboard. It dropped, hit the inside of the rim, bobbed back and forth for a moment and then made its swishing sound down through the net.

The Armory mob came up on its feet with a roar of sound that rocked the walls. They stomped their feet and clapped and whistled and through all that bedlam came the sound of his name. "Babe! Attaboy, Babe! Give us a couple more of them. Show 'em how to sink that pill, Babe Hamilton."

He ducked his head, grinning, a flush of red burning up from his short-cropped, straw-blond hair. He wiped sweat from his forehead with the inside of one long-muscled arm and pushed away teammates that crowded around him, back-slapping, congratulating him.

"Save it, you guys," he told them. "Save it. Mebbe it isn't going to do us a whale of a lot of good. Just because the score is tied, doesn't mean we got this little clambake on ice. There's still four minutes of play."

"You ain't kidding, brother," Jinx O'Hare, hefty Rogue guard told him. "We got a chance like an ice cream cone in Hades, with you trying grandstand shots from all over the court!"

Babe Hamilton stopped flat-footed, and stared in surprise at his teammate. Jinx O'Hare, with his huge, sloping shoulders and long, ape-like, hair-matted arms, slouched off toward his position, his dark, heavy features creased in a frown, his over-full lips curled in a sneer.

"Listen, monkey-face," Babe slammed back at the big guard, "don't get your intestines in an uproar. I had to make that shot. There was nothin' to lose. Every man was cov-

ered and I was going to lose the ball, anyhow I —”

“Forget it, Babe,” someone said and shoved his shoulder in rough good nature. “Jinx is just sore because he didn’t make the toss. You know how he is.”

Babe Hamilton turned to find the tall, redhaired forward, Harry Forbes, at his elbow, his long-nosed, ugly face grinning, the big freckles spreading and standing out against his fair complexion. Babe let some of the anger flow out of him. “Yeah,” he said. “Good old Jinx. Only they misnamed him. They should have called him ‘The Crier.’ No matter how good things are going, they always look bad to Jinx.”

Walking to the center of the court for the jump, though, Babe noticed the peculiar looks some of the other players were sending his way, as though maybe, now that Jinx had pointed it out to them, he had made a foolish, grandstand shot. It brought sharply back to mind, the peculiar way they had all acted tonight, in the locker room and in the pre-game warm-up. Something was wrong; something was going on that he didn’t understand.

That worried Babe. At first, when he’d walked into the locker room and the bedlam of chatter had faded and a decidedly cool silence set in, he’d thought it was some kind of a gag. He’d tried to laugh it off. But it hadn’t worked. He’d said: “What’s eatin’ you guys?” And they’d all looked away, and suddenly almost all at once started talking about something else. So he’d had to let it go, because there wasn’t much time before they had to go out on the floor.

THEN, IN the excitement of the first period of the game with the big, rough, tough, steel mill workers who made up the team called the Pittsmont Puddlers, Babe had forgotten about the cold shoulder he’d gotten in the locker room. He’d had to throw everything he had into this game, that first period, because the Rogues were playing second rate, bum basketball, tonight. The Puddlers, in spite of their size and strength, should

have been an easy setup for the Rogues. But, somehow it hadn’t worked out that way tonight. The Rogues had played raggedly. Nothing you could exactly put your finger on. They just weren’t clicking. Their timing on the razzle-dazzle, tricky plays that were their stock in trade was always just a shade off. It was just something you could sense more than you could see. But it was the difference between a good and a second-rate team. The Puddlers had sensed this, too, right from the beginning and had set out to take advantage of it. They’d played over their heads. To cop a win from the highly touted Rogues would boost their standing in the League.

To offset this, Babe Hamilton had been forced to become the workhorse of the team. He’d gotten hot as a firecracker. And in the second half, his inspired playing and all-out effort had proved to be contagious. The Rogues had snapped out of it and had slowly gone back to their usual championship type of play. They’d whittled down the Puddler’s lead and now Babe had tied the score.

In the excitement of this comeback and in their enthusiasm for Babe’s terrific midcourt, tie-scoring shot, the Roguemens had further forgotten whatever had been troubling them, had caused their freeze-out on him in the locker room. And then Jinx O’Hare’s slurring remark had brought it all back again. Babe Hamilton saw that and swore under his breath.

“The hell with them,” he told himself. “We’re going to take this game, if I have to crawl up and push every shot down through the hoop with my nose. I’m going to make these guys win. And after it’s over, back in the showers, I’m going to root out the trouble.”

He went into the toss-up against the lanky Puddler’s center. He bent his legs and let his arms dangle loose and was on his toes. He came leaping up as though the muscles in his legs were coiled springs, bringing his right arms up at just the right instant to give extra inches to his jump. The power of his legs more than made up

for the added height the Puddler center had on him. He twisted lithely and his fingers reached the high-tossed ball first, tapped it toward Linc Hoffman, the Rogue's forward.

Linc snared the ball, pivoted, feinted away from a Puddler guard, made an underhand toss to Harry Forbes, gliding down toward scoring territory. Forbes was supposed to take the leather, stop, fake a shot and instead lob the ball back to Hoffman as he raced down under the basket for a layup shot. It was a good play. They had it down pat. It was usually sure payoff for a score. But it didn't work out that way, this time. The old timing had gone sour again.

Forbes was going too fast and misjudged Linc's toss. He had to stop and reach back. The tips of his fingers clawed at the ball, but it slipped free, bounced right into the hands of a Puddler guard. The enemy guard made a quick backhand toss up-court to his own forward. The Puddler forward took it neatly, dribbled fast for a few steps, swerving and swivelling out of the way of interference. When he got boxed off, he made a long, arching, cross-court toss to his own center. The lanky jump-man got it clean, dribbled under the basket, took off from his toes into the air, and dunked the ball clean. A small roar of sound went up from the group of Puddler fans who had travelled up for the game.

BABE HAMILTON didn't look at the rest of the team. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He knew how they'd look, heads drooping, all the spark gone out of them, thinking they were beaten. He'd damn well show 'em. He got set in the center for the toss. He got the jump again and this time tapped direct to Hoffman, and took off down court, toward the Puddler's basket. Three-quarters of the way, he stopped cold and spun, as the Puddler guard, covering him, went on past. He turned and this time, the timing was right. The throw from Linc Hoffman came true and clean. He pulled it down, pivoted on one foot, feinted for a throw to the right, decoying the Puddler guard

out of the way, and started off toward paydirt.

He dribbled fast and hard, moving with long strides, swerving and wriggling like an eel, out of the way of opposition players and around them. He got trapped by the lanky Puddler center, shot the ball, sideways, to Jinx O'Hare and raced for the basket. He went up in the air, just to the right of the basket, between two rival players, spun and caught the heave from Jinx at the top of his leap. The second it touched his fingers, he pushed it the few feet toward the net, with just enough backspin to carom it flush down through the webbing. And the score was tied again.

He still didn't look at the rest of the team as he strode back to the center of the court. His big-featured, craggy face was grim and rock-hard. Little white knots of muscles were corded along his jawline. This time, he lost the jump to the Puddler center and took off after the ball. For a few moments he couldn't get near it, as it flew back and forth between the hands of the rival team, who were trying desperately to find a hole, to work a scoring play. But the Rogues' defense was tightly knit now.

Babe Hamilton shot a quick look at the clock and saw that there was less than a minute to play. The score was tied. If this went into an extra period, no telling what might happen, the way the Rogues were playing tonight. He had to ice this off.

He caught a betraying motion on the part of the Puddler who was holding the ball, got a give-away on the direction of the throw, hurled himself in that direction. He saw that he wouldn't be able to grab the ball and instead, tapped it hard toward Jinx O'Hare. Jinx snared it on the run, started down court, tossed it to Forbes, who wheeled and spun the ball a few feet to Babe, again. Babe got set for a toss at the basket but saw at the last moment that it was a long, hard, angle shot. He saw, too, that O'Hare was clear, just to the right of the basket and made a clean, quick throw just as a Puddler guard bore down on him. Jinx O'Hare got

set and looped the ball up in a short arc for a clean sinker that hardly touched the netting. Babe was getting set for the next jump when the gun went off.

Sweat was running off him in rivers when he headed for the shower room. From the bleachers around the floor, from the balcony; the victory howls of the Rock City fans swelled and held in a storm of ear-splitting sound. But Babe Hamilton hardly heard it. Now that it was all over, reaction was setting in. He was pooped. His legs felt like they were made of putty and there was a roaring in his ears. He was used to being the spark-plug of the team, the workhorse. But not like tonight. Always before, he had had a fast, clever little unit of other players working hard all around him. He was the mainspring. He knew that and everybody else knew it; there wasn't any vanity in that knowledge. But with the rest of the parts working sluggishly, there was too much strain on that mainspring. They got away with it, this one game, against second rate opposition. But that wouldn't happen again. Not with a tough engagement against the Allerton Aces, the third team of the League, coming up on Saturday. This thing had to be thrashed out.

THE WENT into the locker room first, ahead of the other guys. Doc Wimmer, the Rogues' coach and trainer was there waiting for him, one foot up on a bench, in front of the bank of lockers. Doc was a thin, wiry little guy, with a lined, tough looking face, but gentle brown eyes. He was half bald and, to look at him now, you'd never know that he'd once been an all-time pro great, back in the days before a premium was put on height.

Doc's steady brown gaze found Babe Hamilton's. The doc's wide mouth flicked a slight grin. "Good game, kid. You were Poppa's little ball of fire in there tonight."

"Lucky game, you mean," Babe corrected, peeling off his jersey. He stood there, naked to the waist, his square, big-boned shoulders, deep chest and long, rippling biceps, glistening with sweat. There wasn't an

ounce of fat on him. You couldn't take on any blubber, playing redhot basketball a couple of nights a week, working down in the mine shafts during the days.

"What is it?" Doc demanded. "You know, kid. What was eating the gang tonight?"

Babe heard the rest of the team, coming down the corridor. He put a finger to his lips and gestured with his other hand toward the door. "Scram, doc," he pleaded. "Let me handle this. I'll straighten it out, whatever it is."

Doc Wimmer sighed, straightened up and pushed his way out through the door of the locker room, between the flow of incoming basketball players. He grinned at some of them. He said: "You guys check your shamrocks, horseshoes and rabbits' feet on the way out. You might need 'em again sometime—Forty-four to forty-two." He let out a long, low whistle.

Nobody laughed, nobody said anything. They filed into the room, lined up before their lockers, and started to strip. Babe Hamilton faced them, from the end of the bench. "All right, you guys," he said. "Spit it out. Something's wrong tonight. All of a sudden, I'm a poison character or something. Okay, that's fine. But at least I have a right to know what it's all about."

The only one who looked at him was Jinx O'Hare. The big, dark, ugly-faced Irishman grinned crookedly. "You wouldn't know, would you, hot-shot?" he sneered. "You're Mr. Innocence, himself, ain't you?"

Babe hitched at his trunks, moved down along in back of the bench. He placed himself in front of the husky guard, his legs astraddle, arms akimbo. "You've never liked me, Jinx," he said, with a deadly calm. "Well, that goes double. We don't have to be in love with each other. So far we haven't let our mutual dislike interfere with the way we play basketball. Out there on the court, we're practically soul-mates. Okay. But tonight some of the poison you feel toward me has spread into the other guys. But not for the same reason, because they don't all have your nasty, jealous

nature. You made the play, just now. You've made it all night. Why don't you come right out with it? What's going on?"

Jinx O'Hare ignored him. He looked at the other players, and jerked his head toward Babe, cockily. "Listen to 'im," he said. "Speeches now, we got to take. What is this, a collitch team? What is this, rah-rah stuff you're givin' us? Maybe you're with the wrong outfit, towhead. With speeches like that, maybe you'd better switch over to them West Side Dukes."

A cry of rage came to Babe Hamilton's throat. He reached out and grabbed a hunk of the guard's uniform in one big fist, drew back the other. "Spill it, monkey-face," he ordered. "Stop beatin' around the bush. Or do I have to beat it out of you?"

"Why, you —" Jinx started. He knocked Babe's hand away, swung his own chunky fist up from the knee. Babe rolled away from the punch and it just struck him a glancing blow at the side of the head. He bore in and pistoned two short punches to Jinx O'Hare's middle. The other man backed away and doubled over, paling. Babe started an uppercut but at the last instant, the rest of the team closed in around them and somebody grabbed his arms, pinned them down. He struggled to get free.

A few feet away, Jinx O'Hare had recovered from the belt in the stomach, was also fighting to break loose from the arms of teammates that held him back.

Harry Forbes' lanky figure stepped between them. He put up a hand toward each of them. "You guys cool off," he ordered. "Doc Wimmer will beat both of your brains out for fighting. You'll get fined, too. It isn't worth it."

HE WAITED for a few moments until both men had cooled off. Then Forbes went over and stood in front of Babe Hamilton. His long, freckled face was very serious. There was an embarrassed look in his blue eyes. He said, levelly: "All right Babe. I'll tell you what's bothering

the boys. We've always liked you. We need you in there with us, too, if we're going to take the League championship away from the Dukes. Only after what happened last night, we're a little afraid of getting a double deal."

"Last night?" Babe echoed in surprise. "Last night I went over to Middle City to scout the Dukes. What —" He broke off, suddenly, the light of awareness breaking on his face. "Oh," he said, softly. "I get it now. You mean about Jean Dorberman?"

"Yeah?" Jinx O'Hare mimicked. "We mean about the Dorberman dame and you."

"What about it?" Babe demanded. "There wasn't nothing to that. I can't help it if the dame's brother is Al Dorberman, the captain of the West Side Dukes. Neither can she. I could not help it if there was a dance after the game, and I had to be polite and twirl a few numbers with the gal after somebody introduced us. Besides, you guys don't have to worry about any double cross, there. It happens that Jean can't stand that big-headed jerk of a brother of hers."

"Yeah?" Jinx put in. "How do we know that? And maybe a few dances don't mean anything. But how about her driving you home in that slinky looking Town-And-Country of hers, after the dance?"

Babe Hamilton felt a flood of red coloring his face. He didn't know what to say to that. He couldn't explain. Anything he said would sound phony, would sound like an alibi. Especially the truth. He couldn't say that he hadn't wanted to ride home with Jean Dorberman, but that she'd practically tricked him into it, by making him miss the last bus back from Middle City.

To cover up his embarrassment, Babe turned suddenly on Jinx O'Hare. "Where'd you get all the dope on last night, mister? What are you doing in your spare time, playing 'Dicky, The Boy Detective' going around, spying on people?"

Harry Forbes answered, instead of Jinx. He said, quickly: "Don't blame it on Jinx, Babe. Things like that

get around. They cause talk. You're being at the game, scouting the Dukes, was okay. But you're taking up with Jean Dorterman, after the game, is being talked about all over town. Especially since everybody knows about your long feud with Al Dorterman, and since the Dukes are the only team that can keep us from getting the League championship. And you know what that means to all of us?"

BAPE DIDN'T answer. He knew all right. Old John Herkimer, who owned the Rock City Coal Mining Company, was a hardboiled, crusty old gent, who for a long time had shown no interest in basketball, or the fact that some of his miners had formed a team. As long as it didn't seem to interfere with their work, he didn't seem to mind. But as the Rock City Rogues started to make a name for themselves, he suddenly developed an interest in the team. He bought them new uniforms and equipment, hired the services of Doc Wimmer as coach and trainer. And as this new season wore on and the Rogues showed themselves to be a powerhouse in the big Mining State League, 'Old Jawn,' as he was called had promised them that if they won the championship, he'd build a sorely needed new housing development for his employees, to replace the rows of dirty, ramshackle company houses in which they now lived.

"What do you think Lee Sutton is going to think about last night, Babe?" Harry Forbes went on.

Babe whirled on him, furious. "Keep Lee out of this," he said, sharply. "Lee's a good kid. When I explain about last night, she'll understand how it was." He stopped suddenly, and his wide-set blue eyes, under their ledges of thick blond brows, got bright and hard with anger. "Look, my personal life is nobody else's business. I don't know why you guys insist on sticking your nose into it. From now on, let somebody else scout the Dukes' games, if you don't trust me. But if you think I'm going to snub Jean Dorterman, just because she's got a heel for a brother, a guy who runs the team that's our main

rivals, you're nuts. All of you."

He pushed his way through them to his locker, stripped, and went into the shower. Under the hard sting of the cold water, Babe's anger cooled a little and he went back over the whole conversation, and reviewed the situation in his own mind. He had to admit that in a way he didn't blame the team. After all, there was more than just sports rivalry between the Dukes and the Rogues. And this fight between the teams for the League championship, meant something even bigger than that.

CHAPTER II

HE REMEMBERED how the whole thing had started. Babe Hamilton's father had worked in the pits of the Rock City Mining Company all of his life. He'd scrimped and saved and, after Babe's mother had died, he'd put every cent he could spare into an insurance policy for Babe. Just before he'd died of pneumonia that winter, Babe's father had told him that the insurance money was to put Babe through college. He was to study mining and meteorology. When he finished school, he was to come back to Rock City and go to work in the mines, starting at the bottom, to learn the problems and work of the men. He was then to work his way up in the company, using the education he'd received, until he was in a top spot, from where he could do things for the men who worked deep in the darkness of the shafts: improve their working conditions and be their ally in every way. That was the dream of Babe's father. Babe had sworn to the old man on his deathbed that he'd make that dream come true.

At college, Babe had played basketball. He'd soon developed into star of the small mining and engineering school. When he'd graduated, he'd been offered spots with several pro teams, but instead of accepting them, much as he loved basketball, he returned to Rock City and took a job in the mines.

Rock City, then, was just becoming basketball-conscious. There were

half-a-dozen amateur teams around town and Babe got the idea that the recreation might be good for some of the younger men in the mines. He got together a small group, some of whom he'd known and played with in the local high school, and formed a team. It was just relaxation and exercise, at first. It was almost in the way of a gag and they did a lot of clowning around, at first. But then they began to work well as a unit, and the other men got interested and listened and watched as Babe coached them in the trick plays he had learned in college. Pretty soon, they were skunking all the local teams. Finally they took on, for a practice game, one of the strong semi-pro teams from a neighboring city. They lost only in a closely-fought, extra-period game and it was then that Babe realized that he had something in the Rogues, a real team. They worked harder, practiced constantly, and finally they were representing Rock City in the Mining State League.

The first year they did fairly well and the town took them to its heart and went basketball crazy. When the new memorial Armory was built, it was equipped with the finest basketball court and bleachers, for the Rogue's hometown games.

Then came a fly in all that nice ointment. It was a man about Babe's own age, named Al Dorberman. Al was the nephew of John Herkimer, the mining company's owner. He was the spoiled son of a wealthy manufacturer, direct descendent of some of the town's first settlers. Almost from the time they got out of diapers, Babe and Al had been thrown together by fate—and had inevitably clashed.

ALTHOUGH they came from opposite ends of town—Al Dorberman from the old, dignified and very expensive residential West Side—Babe from across the railroad, where the mines were located and all the houses and stores were dingy and squalid—they had been tossed against each other from as early as either could remember. Even though their two worlds were altogether different, they were constantly hurled

into conflict by the odd whims of fortune.

Each had his first fist fight with the other, when they were little more than kindergarten kids. The Dorberman car had overheated, passing through the section of town where the Hamiltons lived. The chauffeur had stopped and gone into the Hamilton's yard for water. Little Al had accompanied him. Babe was playing in the yard. Nobody could remember exactly how it happened but inside of a few moments, both youngsters were rolling all over the yard, pummelling and scratching at each other for all they were worth. The first fight had emerged as a draw. Babe had a bloody nose. Al Dorberman suffered a discolored eye. That was the beginning.

Their rivalry had gone on from there. In an effort to be democratic, the Dorbermans had sent their son to the public schools for his early education and Al had been thrown together with Babe, again. Both boys were all-around athletes, each a natural leader in his own class. Right from the beginning, they had both formed teams and played against each other.

Babe's gang always seemed to make up for their lack of proper equipment, with fighting spirit. But no matter what the sport—baseball, hockey, football, basketball—neither team could ever seem to overwhelm the other. The contests were always close. And they seemed to seesaw back and forth. First Babe's team would win a game—then Al Dorberman's boys would take a contest.

When Al Dorberman was finally sent to the local prep school, by some peculiar quirk, for the first time, the private school decided to take the local high school on its list of all athletic engagements. And Al and Babe were at it again. In college, it was the same deal. Al went to one of the swank, ivory covered, steeped-in-tradition Eastern Universities. Babe attended the small college of mines and engineering. And in college both youths chose to specialize in basketball. It almost seemed inevitable that basketball then became the one sport

in which Al's University included the smaller school on its schedule.

THIS WAR separated them both for the first time. Al went into the Navy and Babe enlisted in the Marines. Al went in with a commission. Babe Hamilton got his the hard way, on the field, after the bloody conquest of Tarawa. Both came home after the war, as much-decorated heroes.

For awhile after that, it seemed that the lifetime feud between the two men had ended. But it had flared up again when Babe's Rock City Rogues began to take the basketball limelight and the heart of the town. Al Dorterman heard about it and the old enmity that he held for his rival began to burn again. Shortly afterward, he summoned a dozen all-star ex-college players that he had known, to the town. They were given good jobs at his father's factory and Al formed his own team—the West Side Dukes. These polished, ex-college stars, some of whom had played pro basketball after leaving school, soon showed their class and steam-rollered over their opposition. Now they were tied at the top of the League with the Rogues.

Babe, himself, had always felt the rivalry with Al Dorterman very deeply. There was something about the very sight of Al's heavily handsome, always smirking face, with the dark, mocking eyes and full, weak mouth, which infuriated him. It wasn't that he resented the fact that Al had been born to wealth, had had every break a boy could get, that bothered Babe. It wasn't that Al had everything handed him on a golden platter — everything that Babe and his family had always been forced to sweat and slave for. Babe had known other young men with money—in the Marines and in college. He'd gotten along fine with most of them. What got him, from the beginning, was Al's smug air of superiority over the good things the lucky break of birth had given him—and the rich man's son's condescension and attitude of contempt for anyone who hadn't been as

fortunately endowed. He always gave Babe the impression that he thought Babe had a hell of a nerve to even try and buck the great Al Dorterman, at anything.

And so, the jealous, schoolboy rivalry between the two had grown to a bitter, violent hate that was bound to come to a head and erupt and cause serious trouble at some future clash.

After Al Dorterman had started his own basketball team, Babe's men, who were all familiar with the old rivalry between the two and their intense dislike for each other, had taken up the feud themselves. They had directed it not only against Dorterman, himself, but against the Dukes, as a team. They had plenty of reason for this, too, because, not too strangely, the men Al had selected to bring to Rock City to form his team, were mostly of the same high-and-mighty, showoff type as himself.

THE FIRST game that the two teams had played, on the regular League schedule, had been a bloody, hard-fought affair, that had gone into an extra period. There had been wholesale fist fights that had almost amounted to riots. Several members of both teams had been removed from the game on personal foul penalties. And when the final gun had gone off, the Dukes had emerged the victors, by a score of 53-52. That had left a bitter taste in the mouths of all the Rogues. They could hardly wait until the season was ended and their chance for a playoff game with the Dukes, to avenge that defeat.

In view of that, Babe could understand the team's uneasiness about his taking up with Jean Dorterman, Al's kid sister. The Rogues were on edge and were inclined to exaggerate the incident. No doubt Jinx O'Hare, who had courted Lee Sutton and lost out to Babe and had never quite gotten over it, had helped to make the incident look worse than it really was.

Then, too, even greater than the satisfaction of settling a personal feud between Babe and Al and between the two teams, the outcome of the final League playoff held another stake. It was the building of the new

housing development for the Rock City Mining Company employees.. All the men on Babe's team worked in the mines, along with some of their families. They had been miners for generations and it was in their blood. In spite of the dirt and danger and low pay, there was something about the job that got them. They would never leave it. But the replacing of the rows of shabby company cottages where they all lived, with a big modern and clean housing development, would be a dream come true. They had to get that.

But there had been a condition in old John Herkimer's promise to build it for them. They had to beat the Dukes. It seemed that the two brother-in-laws, John Herkimer and Al Dorterman, Sr., had no love lost between them. And it was a known fact that 'Old Jawn' hated the guts of his pampered and spoiled nephew. To see Al's Dukes go down in defeat before the team of men from his own mines, was now Herkimer's greatest desire. He'd sworn that, if they failed, they'd never get the new housing development.

On the other hand, Al Dorterman, Sr., had egged young Al and his team on to defeat the miners, by swearing that if they failed to win, he'd fire everyone on the team from his plant, including his own son, who in addition would be cut off without a penny. This might have seemed to be an extreme measure. But the fire and enthusiasm of the whole town for the court sport had been caught by both big industrialists. And each was so certain that his chosen team would win out, that it hadn't worried them too much about the alternative being so brutal. They had merely figured it as extra incentive.

Thinking about all that, standing under the cold sting of the shower, Babe finally had to grin. This whole business tonight, if it hadn't been so serious in almost costing them the game with the Puddlers, would have been downright funny. It was almost ridiculous for the guys to think that he might let them down, doublecross them in some way by getting involved with Jean Dorterman. In the first

place, everybody knew that ever since he'd met Lee Sutton, after the war, he hadn't given a thought or a moment of his time to any other girl. But he had to admit that in their wrought-up condition over the close basketball League fight, the team might get the idea that mingling with the enemy in any way at all, could be dangerous.

Well, he told himself, they had nothing to fear. He would probably never even lay eyes on Jean again, after last night's chance meeting. Like he said, to make sure of that, he would let one of the other players scout future games of the Dukes.

HE LEFT the shower and went back out to the locker room, towed himself dry and dressed. As he was about to leave, he stopped at the door, turned around. His big, rugged features were set and serious and earnest as he said: "Look, you guys, take it easy, will you. Maybe you were right and I should have given the Dorterman dame the cold shoulder, last night. I dunno. But I didn't even *think* anything of it. It—it was just one of those things. It was—aw, hell, guys, you all know damned well how I feel about this fight we're in. I'd rather lose my right arm than do anything that might cause us to lose the League championship and—and everything that it means to—to all of us."

Harry Forbes started to say something and at the last minute changed his mind. Linc Hoffman and a couple of the other guys finally let sheepish grins slip onto their faces. All except Jinx O'Hare. The big, dark-visaged guard simply stared surlily at Babe, Stan Kovak, the other guard, said:

"Skip it, then, Babe. We just got a little scared. You know how it is when you stick a good apple into a barrel of rotten ones. We wouldn't want nothing like that to happen with you. Stick with your own kind, kid—stay in your own class."

Babe grinned back at them and walked out of the locker room. Down the long corridor to the street door, he went and stepped out onto the side-walk, stood there for a moment, looking around for Lee. She was us-

ually waiting out here for him after every game. It was practically a ritual with them. He'd walk her home and they'd sit up for awhile at her house, over hot cocoa and sandwiches and rehash the game, or maybe make their plans for the future. After the basketball season, if the Rogues were successful, Babe was practically assured of a promotion to shaft foreman. He was due for it, anyway. The Rogues taking the League title would please old man Herkimer and put the job on ice. When that promotion came along, he and Lee planned to get married.

They'd talk about that, too, and sit and look across the table into each other's eyes. Sometimes they'd talk about how they and their kids would be lucky, to be able to live in the new company housing development, to get away from the grim and squalor of the company streets, where they had both grown up. Or sometimes they'd just sit and hold hands across the table and wouldn't talk at all, but just be content to be together with their dreams.

But tonight, there was no sign of Lee, outside the Armory back exit, waiting for him. It was one of those clear, crisp, winter nights, with a hint of snow in the air that was sharp and tangy and the first breath you took froze the inside of the nostrils and felt good. Babe breathed deep of it, filling his lungs. And then he let it out with a rush, a gasp of surprise.

In the shadow of a big tree, a car stood at the curb. The horn booped and the dim figure at the wheel waved an arm at him. A husky feminine voice called: "Hi, tow-head. Looking for somebody?"

He grinned and walked over to the car. "Yeah," he said. "Is that you, Lee? Whose car you sitting in?" And then he was closer and through the gloom, he saw the long stream-lined chassis of the car, its sleekly polished, part-wooden finish and recognized it as the Town-And-Country convertible that had brought him home from Middle City, the night before. He saw, too, even in the dim light, the slim, dark haired beauty of the girl sitting behind the wheel. He said:

"I—I'm sorry, I thought you were Lee Sutton. She usually—that is she was supposed to meet me here."

Jean Dorterman laughed, a low and throaty sound, pleasant on the ears. "I've seen you two around town together, from time to time. You make a handsome couple, both of you so blonde. She's very beautiful, Babe. I don't suppose I make a very good substitute."

He didn't know what to say. In view of what had happened tonight, of the way the team had reacted to his new acquaintanceship with Jean, he felt funny, even standing here, talking to her. But there was something so charming, so completely disarming about her, that he didn't have the heart to be curt, to brush her off.

"What are you doing here?" he finally managed.

"I came to the game. I don't intend to miss a Rogues game from now on. You were simply terrific, tonight, Babe. You burned up the court."

HE WAS glad the darkness covered up his embarrassment. He was pleased with the compliment but it made him feel uncomfortable. To cover up this feeling, he said, lamely: "I don't understand why Lee isn't here. She was supposed to meet me after the game."

"Perhaps she couldn't make it," Jean suggested. Quickly, she added, "Well, I don't want to cause any trouble. I guess I'd better be driving on. I'd thought maybe I could give you a lift home. But if you already have a date—" She let the words trail off, but made no attempt to start the car, to drive away.

Babe stood there for a moment, shifting his weight awkwardly from one foot to another, wondering where Lee was, wondering how he could get rid of Jean. "Yeah," he said, finally. "Don't let me keep you. It—uh—it was nice, seeing you again."

"You aren't rushing me, are you?" she asked, with that husky laugh again. "Maybe I'll stick around for a few more minutes and if the girl friend doesn't show up, I can still give you that lift. You don't mind, do you? At least you'll have someone to talk to. You might even come inside

and sit down. You'll freeze standing out there."

The cold, thin night air was already beginning to penetrate Babe's inadequate topcoat and the frost was nipping at his ears. He didn't answer for a moment, not knowing what to do. He remembered that Lee had once told him that if for any reason she couldn't keep one of these after-game dates, not to wait around for her. If she wasn't there when he came out, it would most likely mean she couldn't show up for some reason.

And then with a jolt, the realization suddenly hit him that at any minute now, the team would come filing out of the exit behind him. They would see him standing here, talking to Jean Dorberman. It would look bad. They wouldn't believe that it was just a coincidence, that it wasn't planned this way. After all, Jean was a beautiful young woman, from one of the best and wealthiest families in town. It would be hard for anyone to believe that a poor young miner would not snatch at the chance to keep company with her, in spite of having a feud with her brother.

Babe decided that he couldn't have the guys come out and catch him talking to Jean. He gave a quick glance up and down the street, saw that there was nobody around to witness this, and yanked open the door of the convertible.

"I guess Lee couldn't make it tonight. No sense hanging around. Let's go."

Jean Dorberman gave a little sigh of happiness, stepped on the starter. The big, powerful motor purred and the car slid away from the curb, smoothly. It was warm and pleasant in there, out of the cold night air. The dashboard lights glowed pleasantly. As he leaned back against the soft leather seat, Babe caught a faint stirring whiff of a delicate perfume that was vaguely disturbing.

BUT THE next moment, Babe Hamilton came up stiff and startled, as from the corner of one eye he saw a slight figure step out of a darkened doorway, a few buildings down from the Armory exit. It was a young girl, and she was short and

slim and wore no hat. Her hair, the color of yellow wheat rippling in the sun, hung in a long, simple bob around her shoulders. The cheap cloth coat she wore, hugged her trim figure becomingly. Her long legs, sleekly contoured as a dancer's, scissored rapidly as she hurried down the street toward the main avenue, looking neither to the right nor the left.

For a moment, Babe couldn't believe his eyes and, as the car glided past the girl, he poked his head out of the window and looked back at her. There was no question then. He saw her pert little heart-shaped face, with the wide-set brown eyes, the tiny snub of nose and the determined chin.

"Lee!" He cried. "Wait—wait a minute, honey!"

He ducked back inside. "Stop the car," he ordered Jean Dorberman. "It's Lee, back there. Lee Sutton, my—my girl. The one who was supposed to meet me. I—"

Obediently, without a word, Jean slowed the car, pulled in to the curb. Babe jumped out just as Lee Sutton passed. She held her head high and she didn't even glance in the direction of the car. He hurried after her fast-clicking heels, down the street. He caught her arm.

"Lee, baby," he said. "Easy! What's the idea? What's the matter?"

She wrenched her arm away and kept walking, not looking at him. "Leave me alone," she said through her teeth, little puffs of steamy breath accompanying the words. "Go on, get back into that million-dollar buggy, with your million-dollar baby. Don't be a chump and keep her waiting."

"Stop that talk, Lee!" he said, walking fast to keep up with her. "I can explain. It isn't like you think. I—honey, Jean Dorberman means nothing to me. I only—"

He stopped, tried a new tack. "I didn't think you were coming," he said. "So I—well, I got into the car rather than—" He stopped, not wanting her to know about his trouble with the team.

Lee Sutton stopped walking abruptly. She wheeled around to face him.

Her brown eyes were blazing and she was very pale, except for two spots of color on her high cheekbones. "Look, Babe Hamilton," she told him, "I heard about you and—and that girl, last night, at Middle City. I—I tried not to think anything about it. But tonight, when I was waiting for you, I saw her drive up and park. I hid in the doorway to watch, to see what you would do. Well—I—I—" Her voice faltered and her full lower lip started to quiver. "I saw, Babe. I saw you get in the car and drive off with her. So skip the explanations, Baby. They're really not necessary. You—you're free, white, and twenty five. And I guess I don't blame you much. A girl like—like that can do a lot for you. Of course, it'll be kind of tough on the Rogues, but—"

Her voice broke and she couldn't finish. Babe had stood there, dumbfounded, listening to her. Now he licked his lips and found his voice. He took hold of her arms and bent his face toward hers. "You listen to me, Lee," he said, sternly. "I don't know what you heard about last night, but there—there was nothing to it. She just drove me home, that's all. Gee, honey, don't get mad like that. If you don't like it, I won't even see her again. I swear it, Lee. She means nothing to me. I—I hardly even know her. Believe me."

She looked up at him, her eyes misty with tears. She shook her head violently, wrenched her arms free from his grip. "You've got to show me, Babe. Any—anybody but her—*Jean Dorberman*. After all her brother has done to you! No, Babe, I—I can't fight against competition like that."

She wheeled away from him, then, and started to run down the street, as fast as she could go. He started after her, halfheartedly and then stopped. It was no use. He knew how stubborn and hardheaded Lee Sutton could be. He wouldn't be able to talk to her anymore tonight. Maybe tomorrow, after she'd cooled off a little, he could explain things, make her see the truth. He stopped and stood there for a moment, watching her disappear around a corner, onto the Avenue.

AND THEN he became aware of the fact that Jean Dorberman's car had pulled up to the curb near him again. Jean called out: "You'd better get in and let me take you home, Babe. Or if you want, I can help you catch up to her. Maybe I can even help you explain."

He thought about that for a moment and then shook his head. Anger burst suddenly in his brain, at the way circumstances were piling up against him. He blurted: "Leave me alone. Can't you see the trouble you're causing? Stay the hell away from me, will you? Get out of here."

For a moment she didn't answer. Then she said: "I'm sorry, Babe. Honestly, I am. I didn't mean to start any trouble. I'll do anything to make up for it. Get in, Babe and let's talk it over. Maybe between us, we can think of some way to get you out of this jam, while I'm driving you home."

He shook his head and some of the angered flowed out of him. He felt a little ashamed of himself for popping off that way. From the way Jean spoke, he could tell that she was genuinely sorry for the trouble she'd caused. He realized that it wasn't entirely her fault, either. At least, she hadn't done it on purpose. She was just trying to be nice to him.

"No. No, thanks," he said, finally. "I'm sorry I spoke that way. But I'm going to walk home. I want to think. The cold air will do me good."

Jean apologized again and then slipped the car into gear and drove off. Babe started the long walk home, the night frostiness clearing his brain, helping him to think. By the time he reached his own section of town, he was chilled and shivering. But as he walked up the narrow, hilly side street, lined with long rows of ramshackle company houses, their white paint long ago clouded a dirty gray from the constant smoke and dirt from the Colliery stacks, Babe Hamilton squinted his eyes and let his mind visualize how it would look, with all these cramped, rickety old shacks torn down. He could almost see the big, new apartment buildings that Herkimer had promised to build. They would be spacious and clean.

There would be a little grass around them and playgrounds for the kids.

He shook his head hard and told himself that nothing could prevent that dream from coming true. If it meant winning the League basketball title, beating the West Side Dukes, it would be done. If he had to do it, all by himself, single-handed.

And he wasn't going to let this silly business of Jean Dorberman and the trouble her sudden interest in him had caused, get in the way. Tomorrow, he'd straighten the whole thing out. He'd have a talk with Lee and set her right on the situation. He'd see Jean, too, if necessary and explain things to her, tell her that he couldn't be seen with her, any more, ask her to avoid him, if she really didn't want to start any trouble.

CHAPTER III

BUT THINGS didn't work out that way. Babe didn't see Lee that day. He went to the office where she worked, but she had gone to lunch early and he missed her. Down in the chill, dark depths of Shaft 34, Babe worked with the other miners; he did the work of three men that day, trying to keep from thinking, worrying about the thing that had happened between himself and Lee. But even working like a fool didn't help. He couldn't get away from his thoughts. And that night when he called at her house, she refused to see him.

He left and went to basketball practice down at the Armory. The rest of the team greeted him coolly and he knew that somehow they had heard what had happened the night before, knew about his trouble with Lee. They didn't say anything, at first.

Babe's practice shots were off. His mind wasn't on what he was doing. And when they ran through some new plays, he muffed a couple of simple passes, loused things up. Still, the rest of the team didn't say a word. They just stared at him stolidly and made no comment.

During a practice scrimmage, though, Babe found himself playing the most ragged basketball of his

life. He missed the simplest of shots. Handling the ball, he was all thumbs. He played like a grammar-school beginner, instead of a seasoned star with a couple of years of high school, four years of college and a couple of seasons of semi-pro ball under his belt. After awhile it began to get him down. He began to lose his temper and found himself unnecessarily roughing up some of the players on the second team.

During a mad scramble for a free ball, Babe gave Hap Steiner, a substitute guard playing against him, the hip with too much force and Hap was bowled over, hard. He got up, rubbing his skinned elbows, his face whit with anger.

"Why don't you take it easy, hot-shot?" Steiner shouted at Babe. "Just because your game is stinking up the place tonight, doesn't mean you can take it out on me."

Babe, knowing he'd been in the wrong, hung his head a little and answered, sheepishly: "I'm sorry, Hap. I guess I lost my head a little."

"Go on," Jinx O'Hare's gruff voice suddenly put in from behind him. "You did that deliberately. I saw you. Why don't you save that grandstand stuff for a game, Hamilton, where the Dorberman dame can see what a wonder boy you are? Jeeze, another week of you hangin' around that phony little twist and you won't be fit to play tiddle-de-winks, let alone basketball."

Babe spun around, his face flaming, his jaw jutting out, his fists balled. "Take that back!" he ordered through his teeth. "I've taken enough of your lip, O'Hare. You've done nothing but try to make trouble for me the past few weeks. Cut it out, right now, or it'll be you and me all over this court."

O'Hare leaned toward him, flexed his huge, sloping shoulders. "That's fine with me. You want to make it right now?"

Before Babe could answer, Doc Wimmer came out from the sidelines, put his hand on Babe's shoulder. "Skip it, kid," he said, quietly. "Jinx didn't mean anything. We're all strung a little tight, what with only

a few more games to go before the playoff with the Dukes."

He squeezed Babe's shoulder, smiled. "You look a little tired and upset, too. You haven't been on your game tonight. Why don't you skip the rest of the session and get home and get some early shuteye? You could use it. We got a tough game coming up with the Allertown Aces, tomorrow night. If we don't take it, we drop into second place."

Babe started to protest that he was all right, but before he could speak, Doc continued: "Go on, kid. Do like I say. You'll be all right tomorrow. You'll be rested and back in form. You'll run all over those Aces."

Babe suddenly felt tired and all let-out. He said: "Whatever you say, Doc," and turned and slumped off the court, headed for the showers.

ALITTLE later, as he exited from the rear of the Armory alone, hunching his neck deep into the turned up collar of his topcoat, against the sudden chill of the outdoors, he saw again Jean Dorberman's long, low-slung Town-And-Country job waiting at the curb. He averted his eyes and pretended not to see the car, swung away from the door and started up the street.

The horn beeped at him and Jean's soft, husky voice called: "Don't run away, Babe. I want to talk to you. It—it's important!"

He stopped and turned slowly back toward her. He stood stiffly by the door of the car. "What is it?" he said. "Make it quick, will you. Maybe you mean well enough, but you've gotten me into a pile of trouble. I don't want any more."

"There's something you ought to know, Babe." Her voice came quietly through the darkness inside the car. "I hate to be a tattle-tale but this is bad and I think maybe we ought to do something about it. Your friend, Lee Sutton, is out with my brother tonight on a date."

For a moment, her words didn't register completely and Babe Hamilton just stood there, dazed. Then the full import of what she had said jarred home. "What?" he demanded

sharply. "Are you trying to kid me? Lee go out with—with Al Dorberman?"

"That's straight," she said, a little sadly. "I wouldn't kid about anythin' like that. I—I just thought you ought to do something about it. You see I—well—I sort of feel responsible."

"I—I can't believe it," he managed. He leaned against the roof of the car and his legs suddenly felt like they were filled with jelly. "How do you know this, Jean? Can you prove it?"

"Sure. Al heard that you and Lee had a fight last night. So, tonight he called her up and asked for a date. She gave it to him. They're out at that roadhouse, The Old Mill, out on Route 7, right now, Babe."

He grabbed at the handle of the car door, yanked it open. His voice sounded strange, uneven and hoarse, as he said: "Listen, do me a big favor, Jean. Take me out there."

"Get in," she said.

He climbed into the seat beside her, slumped back against the leather upholstery and sat there in a daze, trying to think, anger rising inside of him, as the car sped away up the street.

"I think she's just doing it to get even with you," Jean offered. "She's trying to get your nanny, showing you that she can do a little two-timing, too. Only that's not such a good idea. I happen to know my dear brother. He's bad medicine for a sweet kid like that Lee Sutton. She won't stand a chance."

"I don't get it," Babe said angrily. "I didn't do any two-timing. What's the matter with the little fool? She must be looking for trouble."

FOR A MOMENT, Jean didn't say anything. Then she said: "It's none of my business, really, but I seem to be mixed up with you two, so I'd like to offer a suggestion. Don't let this get you. If she's sees it's working and getting you jealous, she'll keep it up. When we get there, I'll go with you. We'll pretend it's just a coincidence that we picked that place. Maybe we'll dance and have a couple of drinks and when you

see her, pretend that it does not bother you a bit. It'll be hard to do, Babe, but I'll guarantee it'll work."

He thought over the suggestion and, although he didn't like the idea much, he couldn't figure out a better one. And he decided that at least Jean was right. He couldn't go barging into the place like an outraged lover and make a fool of himself in front of everybody. For a moment he wondered if it was wise for him to go out to The Old Mill at all. But some perverse impulse made him want to go, to see for himself, to really make sure that Lee could do a thing like this—for whatever reason.

The big roadster glided along through the dark winter night, out of town and along the highway. In a few minutes, Jean was guiding the car into a parking space outside of a big frame mansion with neon lights.

The Old Mill was a small-time roadhouse that featured cheap drinks, a dimly lighted, cozy atmosphere, and a small noisy band. It was patronized mostly by the wilder young crowd from Rock City. There was the babble of voices and laughter against the blare of trumpets from the band, as Babe and Jean entered. The place was thick with smoke and the smell of beer. They moved past a small, crowded bar and into the main room, where tables were jammed together all around a small dance floor. Booths lined the walls and, at first, the dim lights made it hard for Babe to pick out the faces of the people there.

As he walked behind Jean to an empty booth, he kept looking around, waved to some men from the mines that he knew. At first he didn't see any sign of Lee and his heart went leaping. Maybe Jean was wrong; maybe Lee hadn't come here with Al Dorberman, after all. Maybe she'd wised up and backed out at the last moment. And then his heart dropped again.

She was there. She was in a rear booth, twirling an empty cocktail glass by the stem with one hand, looking across the table at the heavy set, sleekly handsome Al Dorberman, who was talking fast and smiling and

gesturing with his hands.

Almost the same instant Babe saw Lee, she also spotted him. She looked up and for a moment she stared at him, her lips parted a little, her eyes wide. And then she looked quickly away. Babe saw that Al Dorberman had followed her glance, was looking at Babe and Al's sister, Jean. He laughed and made some remark to Lee. She laughed, too, but too quickly and too hard.

Jean took Babe's hand and squeezed it. "Easy!" she cautioned. "Play it out the way I told you."

"Yeah," he said, dully. "Sure." He slumped down into a booth opposite Jean and across the room from the one occupied by Lee and Al Dorberman. He kept staring over there at them. Actually, seeing Lee here, dressed up in her Sunday best, with Al, had knocked the props right out from under him. He couldn't seem to get his bearings. He didn't know what to do or say. He couldn't seem to think. He was numbed emotionally and all he could do was sit there, looking across the room at Lee and Al. It got him completely, then, when he saw them suddenly get up and, arm in arm, move out onto the dance floor. Lee was smiling and laughing all the time, chattering gaily and looking up into Al's face.

BABE HAD the urge to get up from there and go over and punch that silly, smug and smirking grin right off Al Dorberman's face and then pick Lee up and carry her out of here. But the impulse quickly left. He didn't seem to have the strength. Vaguely, he heard Jean Dorberman say:

"Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she didn't just go out with Al to make you jealous. She seems to be having a good time."

He watched them out on the floor, dancing cheek to cheek. He felt all cold and empty inside, to think that Lee would do this to him—for any reason. "Yeah," he said. And then a waiter came over and Jean gave him an order. A few moments later, he came back and set drinks in front of them. Babe looked down at his,

stupidly, for a moment.

"Drink it," Jean suggested, gently. "You need it, Babe. You've had a bad shock. It'll straighten you out a little."

"Sure," Babe said. He was never much of a drinking man, especially during basketball season. But Jean was right. He needed this one. Maybe it would help him. He picked up the glass and drained it quickly.

Jean said: "Last night, Babe, I guess I gave you the impression that I hate *him*. I just hate some of his ways, his laziness and his snobbishness. I'd like to see it knocked out of him. Once it is, I have an idea Al will turn out to be not such a bad egg."

Babe didn't answer. He hardly heard her. He was busy watching the way Lee Sutton and Al Dortermann danced together. He had to admit that they did make a striking couple—Al so dark and Lee so blonde. He kept trying to think of some way that he could get Lee away from him for a moment, talk to her alone, try to reason with her, straighten this crazy mess out. But it was hard for him even to think. His brain seemed fuzzy around the edges. Vaguely, he heard Jean Dortermann saying:

"—so I'd like to see your Rogues give Al's Dukes the worst licking they've ever had. I think maybe it would help to straighten him out, help him get smart to himself." She reached across the table and put her slim white hand on top of Babe's. "And that's not the only reason I want to see you win, Babe. I like you. I'd heard a lot about you and seen you around town a lot, but the other night when I met you, I—I couldn't help it, Babe, something just happened inside of me. Does it have to make any difference between us, just because Al's my brother? Just because you come from one side of the town, and I, the other? It—it's not fair, Babe, for people to make trouble for you because of that. I—"

"Let's get out of here," he said, suddenly, cutting her off. He put his hand over his eyes for a moment and then looked down at the empty glass

in front of him. There suddenly seemed to be three glasses there instead of one. And the table seemed to tilt and rock. He wondered vaguely if he was getting drunk. But he'd only had the one drink—or had he? He couldn't seem to remember too well, now. He got up on his feet bumping against the table, almost knocking it over. He looked out over the dance floor and the whole room seemed to be spinning around his head, all at once. The dancing couples all blurred together. He put his hand to his forehead, muttered, "Get me—outside. Got to—got to get some air. Feel sick..."

He lurched away from the booth as Jean got up. He almost fell against a nearby table but at the last moment she grabbed his arm, helped him to hold his balance. Swaying, almost stumbling, he made his way out of the roadhouse, Jean hanging onto his arm, guiding him. He was vaguely aware of people staring at him, backing out of his way in alarm. And then he was outside and the cold air was hitting him hard. He lunged into the car and fell back against the seat. Nausea tugged at his stomach but he fought it off. Wave after wave of blackness seemed to sweep over him and he let himself be carried off into all that soft darkness. That was the last thing he remembered....

WHEN BABE Hamilton awakened the next morning, at first he thought a dozen little devil-men were perched on his brow, giving it a workout with their tiny sledgehammers. And then he realized it was only the pounding of his aching skull. His eyelids felt heavy and hot. His mouth tasted as though it were stuffed with wads of cotton waste.

He sat up, groaning, putting his face into his hands and rocking back and forth, dizziness sweeping over him. For a moment he couldn't remember anything about the night before and wondered what was the matter with him.

He murmured: "I'm sick. Just my luck to be coming down with some sickness the day of the game with the Allertown Aces. I—"

And then some of it began to come

back to him. As in some nightmare dream, he gradually recalled the events of the night before, but the details of what had happened at the roadhouse were still foggy in his mind. He hoped he hadn't made a damned fool of himself. He realized that he should have known better than to take a drink. He wasn't used to the stuff, was upset, on edge. Still, it was hard to believe that one drink would hit him so hard.

A little later, after he was washed and dressed, Babe felt better. But he wasn't himself all day long. He was grouchy and irritable. He kept worrying about what would happen that night, down at the Armory. He knew that he had been seen out at The Old Mill with Jean Dorterman and that, by now, the news was probably all over town. Doc Wimmer would take his head off. The rest of the team would hate his guts for sure now, after all his promises to them, about not seeing Jean again. He'd never be able to make them believe the way the thing actually happened.

That night, he put off going down to the Armory till as late as possible, hoping by the time he reached the locker room, the rest of the team would already be out on the floor, warming up. But it wasn't that way. They were all sitting there, glumly, waiting for him. Doc Wimmer was pacing up and down, his hands behind his back, his lined face grim and his eyes, for once not gentle, but cold and hard. He started on Babe the moment he entered.

"Mr. Hamilton," he began. "It's nice of you to show up. We began to think maybe you had some previous engagement." The coach's voice dripped sarcasm. "Not only do you show up late, but you come in here looking like six nights on the bar-room floor. Look at you! Bags under your eyes, pale as Aunt Lizzy's ghost. What makes you think you're going to be able to get out there and play a hard, fast game of basketball in your condition?"

"I'm all right, Doc," Babe said, going straight to his locker and start-

ing to strip. "Don't worry about me, will you?"

"Don't worry, he says," Doc Wimmer mimicked. "Babe, you know I don't hold you guys to any hard and fast training rules. You're not a bunch of kids—you're supposed to be able to use good judgment. You want a couple of beers or a few dances with a girl, I don't blow my top about it. But when a guy goes out on a rip-snortin' tear the night before an important game, ties on a bag like you had last night out at The Old Mill, I—"

"I didn't go out on any binge," Babe cut in, quickly. "Doc, last night I only had one drink. It just hit me. It—it made me sick or something."

THE REST of the guys laughed. Doc Wimmer said: "One drink, my left tonsil! You were bagged up high, wide and handsome. Half a dozen people saw you reeling around that roadhouse, with Jean Dorterman."

Jinx O'Hare piped in: "Yeah, forcing a sweet kid like Lee Sutton to go out with a crumb like Al Dorterman!"

Babe said: "I didn't force Lee to do anything. I didn't know anything about her date with Al. I'm not her nursemaid. I can't stop Lee from going out with anybody she pleases."

"You dumb cluck," Jinx told him. "She just did it to bring you to your senses. She did it to make you jealous, that's all. But a lot of people don't know that. They'll mark her lousy. They know Al Dorterman's rep with women."

Babe started toward Jinx with his fists balled, his face livid with rage, his eyes narrowed to slits. Doc Wimmer quickly stepped in front of him, put a hand against his big chest and held him back. "That isn't going to help anything, Babe," he said. Over his shoulder, he ordered: "You keep your big mouth out of this, O'Hare. I'm handling this thing."

"Well, somebody ought to fix that bigshot punk's applecart for him, that's all," Jinx grumbled.

"Knock it off and get out there on the floor for your warm-up—all of

you," Wimmer told them. When Babe started to follow the others, Doc made him wait. "I want a little talk with you first, Babe," he said.

When the others had filed out and the two of them were alone in the locker room, Doc Wimmer began his pacing again, while Babe sat down on a bench, put his head in his hands. "Babe," Doc began, "I've always thought a lot of you. At first, when the gang came to me with this story about you and the Dorterman dame, I laughed it off. I told them they were nuts. I took your part. And I figured I was right, too... Then you go and let me down. You pull a stunt like last night. After that, I don't know what to think, Babe. It begins to look like the gang is right and you have blown your top. I don't know what's the matter with you, carrying on with tha dame, like you did last night. What do you think it's doing to the team?"

Babe didn't answer. There didn't seem to be anything to say. If he tried to explain, it would just sound like a phony excuse. Doc wouldn't believe him.

"I suppose you can't help it, if you've fallen for this girl, Babe. For a guy of your age, with your background and ambition, she could do a lot, and I guess it would be pretty hard for you to turn down such an opportunity. And maybe you really like the girl. But it's a bad combination, Babe, a poor boy like yourself and a girl of wealth and family like she is. I—"

"Wait a minute, Doc," Babe stopped him, looking up. "What are you driving at? There's something haywire here. What's this stuff about me turning down some 'opportunity'?"

Doc Wimmer looked surprised. He said: "Everybody seems to know it, Babe. I didn't think it was supposed to be a secret. Didn't Jean Dorterman tell you that if you'd quit the Rogues, leave Lee and start going with her, she'd fix it up with her father to give you a big-paying job in his factory?"

Babe got pale. "No!" he almost shouted. "That's a dam' lie. Jean never said anything like that, never

made any such offer. Even if she did, you don't think I—" He broke off, got up off the bench, started out of the room. The coach grabbed his arm, stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Babe. Where are you headin'?"

"To get that damned Jinx O'Hare," Babe gritted. "He's the only one who'd start a story like that. He's out to break me. I'll knock the truth out of his dam' ugly mouth, Doc. He can't get away with pulling a raw deal like that."

"Take it easy, Babe," Doc cautioned. "Dont blame it on Jinx. He only heard it from somebody else. I got the same story from a couple of other people."

BABE PAUSED, his broad brow furrowed with a puzzled frown. He shook his head as though from a stiff blow. "I don't get any of this, Doc. It's too much. Somebody's out to get me but I don't know who or why. I—I can't fight in the dark. It's like trying to battle a windmill. I—"

"Don't go starting any trouble with Jinx," Doc said. "Leave him alone. He's the best guard I've got and we're going to need him out there tonight—and for every game from here in."

"Okay, Doc," Babe said, ruefully, rubbing his fist. "But as soon as the season's over, I'm going to have it out with that muttonhead."

He and Doc went out on the floor, then. Babe went through the pre-game warmup with the rest of the team. The game started with Babe winning the jump. He tapped the ball toward Linc Hoffman, who dribbled for a few steps, then wheeled and passed to Harry Forbes. Harry went tearing down the court, fast and slippery as a greased grunter, spinning through the Allertown Aces who were caught flatfooted. He slid between a couple of Allertown guards, sprung up toward the basket for a beautiful layup shot and the Rogues had drawn first blood.

The packed Armory went wild. It was a perfect start. It looked good. It looked like the hometown Rogues were redhot, tonight. It made Babe feel better, too. Going back to the

center of the court for the next jump-up, he grinned to himself. It was an ill wind that blew nobody any good. If the thing that had happened to him was making the team fighting mad so that they were playing heads-up ball, that was something on the right side of the ledger.

Babe won the next jump, too. This time he tapped the ball to Stan Kovak, who came charging down court, flipped it to Jinx O'Hare, who was standing completely clear, just forward of midcourt. Jinx had all the time in the world. He set himself. His knees bent. His hands pushed the ball up and out in a high arching shot that hit the backboard one solid bounce, just behind the net and zoomed down through the webbing for a perfect basket.

The crowd broke out in a thunder of applause that was ear-splitting. The Allertown Aces looked bewildered and angry. The Rogues pranced about jauntily. Here they were, in one of the toughest games of the season with one of the most dangerous leading League teams, and before the contest was two minutes old, the Rogues were snowing all over them to the tune of an easy four point lead. For the moment, Babe forgot the sick pitching of his stomach, which had come over him when he'd first come out on the court, and his throbbing headache. All he thought of now was that if they could run up a big score over the Aces in a decisive victory, maybe it would help everything turn out right for a change.

But on the next jump from center, Babe lost the leap. The Ace center tapped to one of his forwards, who passed to a guard. The ball zigzagged back and forth across court for a moment but the Aces couldn't seem to penetrate the Rogue's tough defense. Then Jinx O'Hare suddenly intercepted the ball, whipped it in a long side-toss to Linc Hoffman. Linc got trapped and in desperation made a wild, one-handed heave toward the distant basket. The ball hit the rim, bobbed there, then tumbled out.

Maxon, the Aces' star and center, leaped up and grabbed the sphere,

pushed it over the heads of a couple of Rogue men to his own guard. The Rogues were caught napping and in a neat, intricate series of passes, the Aces swept down the floor and under the Rogue basket. There Maxon took the ball and made an easy tip-in shot.

THAT ENDED the Rogue's flash beginning. On the next jump, Babe outleaped the giant Maxon again, but it didn't do him any good. The tap was intercepted and the Aces swarmed down the court into scoring territory again. There was a mad scramble under the basket and as one of the Ace forwards made his shot, Stan Kovak accidentally hacked him across the arm. The foul was called on him, even though the ball sunk through the basket clean for two more points.

The Aceman took his free throws and dropped them both, putting the basketeers from Allertown ahead for a two point lead. That was the beginning of the end. With the score suddenly turned their way, the powerful Aces, all big men from a neighboring coal town, all rough, tough and fast, ran wild. Just to make it worse, the Rogues suddenly blew up. They became a bunch of fumblebums. They tried hard but they just didn't have it. They muffed most of their well-worked-out plays. When one of them went through all right, Lady Bad Luck stepped in and fouled them up. Somebody would trip or the ball would take a bad hop on a bounce-pass.

A few minutes before the half ended, the Rogues were trailing 29-16. Looking up at the scoreboard, Babe Hamilton went a little crazy. A blur of red clouded his eyes. He knew that the sudden slump the Rogues had gone into had been brought about by the trouble he had inadvertently caused by getting involved with Jean Dorberman. In desperation, he suddenly went berserk and tried to win the game all by himself.

Maxon, the Aces' star center, never had a chance the last few minutes of the first half. Runner-up along with Babe as a candidate for All-League

center, Maxon suddenly looked like a chump, a green kid, playing his first game. No matter how high, how fast Maxon jumped, Babe took the tap away from him.

He took a pass from Kovak near the center of the court and somehow bulled his way through their whole Ace team, like a madman, down under the Aces' basket, miraculously escaping having a foul called on him, and tipped one in, practically under the noses of the whole opposing team. All the Aces stared at him, with their mouths open. The crowd didn't even applaud. They were stunned by Babe Hamilton's sudden surge, his desperate, dazzling play, up and down the court. They never had seen a superman in action before. It was something beyond mere applause, so they just sat there and watched, entranced, hope leaping in their hearts that the game might yet be pulled out of the fire.

The few times in the last few minutes of that furiously-fought first half that the Aces got hold of the ball, they didn't have a chance. Babe Hamilton seemed to be everywhere at once, leaping, spearing out his long arms, blocking, twisting and squirming. He seemed to be a dozen men rolled into one. He intercepted Ace passes, broke up some of their cleverest, most puzzling trick plays, single-handed. And once he took the big leather sphere into his own hands, the scoreboy got set to chalk up another two points.

JUST BEFORE the half ended, Babe Hamilton made two desperate, long end-court shots—one of them, one-handed, from an off balance position. It seemed little short of a miracle when the ball swished down through the netting, without touching rim of the hoop. After slaming down the whole length of the floor, Babe made another perfect shot, adding a total of eight more points for the Rogues. But the Rogues still lagged behind by the score of 29 to 24.

Between the halves, Babe Hamilton sprawled on his back, his big chest heaving, sweat shining all over

him, his face flushed and drawn. His teammates looked at him, awed, Linc Hoffman drawled, chuckling: "What happened to you, Babe? Where did you get that shot in the arm? We could all use a little of that stuff. Man, I've seen some basketball in my young life, but never anything like those last few minutes."

Several of the others joined in with complimentary remarks to Babe, but then Jinx O'Hare chimed in: "Naturally, the guy's got to put on the big show," he sneered. "Didn't you see his sweetie-pie, Jean Dorterman, up there in the stands? He's got to make himself look good for Miss Ritzy-pants!"

Babe Hamilton felt a hard core of anger knot up inside of his stomach. He ached to get up and go over and smash his fist into Jinx's big, sneering mouth and shut him up for good. But he was too pooped. He didn't feel that he had the strength to move, after that last "single-handed" whirlwind attack, against the Aces. And he had to save what remaining strength he had for the second half. They still had a long way to go.

Jinx's remark busted the Rogues' bubble of enthusiasm for Babe's smash playing. A pall of silence fell over the whole team after that and they were right back where they'd started, nervous and upset and bitter against a teammate they thought was on the verge of betraying them, for a beautiful girl and all the things that her money and power could give him.

Doc Wimmer came in and talked to them quietly, stressing the importance of winning this game. If they dropped it, he reminded them, they would slip down to second place in the League and might never get back to the top. The West Side Dukes would then have the League championship all to themselves. There wouldn't be any chance of a playoff. He finished up by telling them they'd done well in that first half, against a strong team and a lot of tough breaks. But they'd have to do even better in the next period.

They went out onto the court for

the second stanza, rested a little, but with no bounce, no life to them. And Babe Hamilton seemed to have shot his bolt. He lost the tap. He still played sharp, close-to-the-cuff basketball but he wasn't the streak of flame that had finished up the first half. And the rest of the team were hot and cold, but couldn't seem to get together.

The Aces must have gotten a hot pep talk too, because in the first few minutes, they worked their way down the court in a series of razzle-dazzle, lightning-swift plays that netted them four more points.

Then Babe was fouled in a tangle for a free ball. Getting set on the foul line for his free throws, he felt nervous and jittery. His hands were clammy with sweat and he couldn't seem to loosen up. He missed both foul shots and a long drawn wail of anguish went up from the hometown fans.

Passing Babe, Jinx O'Hare sneered: "Just a flash in the pan, eh, kid? Even a campfire girl couldn't miss two free shots in a row like that."

Before Babe could answer, the ball was put into play again. But anger began to seeth all through his guts. A ringing came into his ears. Two times he took the ball and made wild throws. He stood flatfooted while Maxon twisted and dribbled around him, then raced down to the Rogues' basket to sink an easy goal.

TH E SCORE was 40-29, favoring the Aces, when the real tragedy occurred. There was a scramble for an intercepted cross-court pass, when suddenly, Jinx O'Hare, plunging into the melee, collided full force with Babe, who was just backing out of the tangle with the ball. Babe was knocked flat on his back and the ball bounded out of his hands. He didn't even see the play that followed, where the Aces took the ball swiftly down court for another score. All he saw was Jinx O'Hare's angry, sneering face above him.

Babe got to his feet, a cry of rage breaking from the back of his throat. All the insults he'd taken from the

big guard, all the trouble that had piled up on him the past few days, rolled up now into a ball of hate for Jinx. He went tearing at Jinx, blind with anger, swinging his fists like a windmill.

Jinx O'Hare ducked under his first wild punch and pushed out his own fist in a stiff jab. It caught Babe flush on the nose and he felt hot, salty blood running down over his lip and back into his throat. But Jinx's punch didn't stop him. And he didn't bother to take another swing at the guy. He just closed in, leaping full onto the other man's husky figure, bearing him down onto the floor. Jinx slammed fists against his ribs, but Babe was like a wild man, now. He got his fingers around Jinx's throat. He sat astraddle the other man and thumped O'Hare's head down against the floor half a dozen times, before the rest of the team pulled him off, yanked him up onto his feet.

He stood there, shaking and trembling as the fog of temper slowly faded from his brain. He didn't even hear the things the ref was telling him. The first thing he heard was Doc Wimmer ordering him to leave the game, to go to the showers.

"We could have put up with almost anything, for the rest of the season, Hamilton. But we can't use a sorehead, a guy that goes off his trolley and attacks one of his own teammates. When Jinx bumped you, it was an accident, Hamilton. I saw it clearly. Now get out of here. And you'll be a lucky guy if you ever appear on a basketball court in Rock City again."

Babe swallowed the hard lump that hanging, his shoulders slumped. He saw them helping Jinx O'Hare toward the first aid room. He was aware of the hostile eyes of the crowd upon him, of the heavy silence that hung over the bleachers, as he left the game.

Alone in the locker room, the walls seemed to close in on him. The place seemed to be peopled by the ghosts of all the other players who had used it. Whispering voices seemed to taunt him.

"You're washed up, feller," they seemed to say. "Through. You've really fixed things up nice for yourself."

"But I didn't!" he said out loud. "I haven't done anything wrong. It's just that everything has worked out against me. Just a bunch of rotten breaks. You can't fight anything like that. You—"

HE STOPPED at the sound of his own voice, all alone there in the locker room. He stripped and showered and dressed for the street. Dimly, from along the corridor that led to the court, he heard the occasional dull roar of the crowd, following the play of the game that was going on without him. But he could tell by the intervals between that sound and by its tone, that things weren't going so good.

He went straight home from the Armory, walking all the way through flurries of light snow and a whipping wind. The folks were out to a late show when he got home and he was glad of that. He didn't feel like facing anybody. He tried to figure things out. But his thoughts seemed to be running in circles and he didn't get anywhere. There didn't seem to be anything he could do. He was stymied by a series of coincidences, by the mere fact that he'd met and talked to a nice kid who seemed to like and admire him. He'd been tagged a heel and made to look like one, just because that girl happened to be the sister of a man who was his sworn enemy—and that of his team—a man who stood between them and everything they wanted.

As if to punish himself, he switched on the radio to the local station, caught the last few minutes of the broadcast of the Rogues-Aces game. It was a runaway, with both himself and Jinx O'Hare out of the game. It was pure slaughter. The final score was 69-47 and after the gun went off, the announcer commented that this decisive defeat seemed to fizzle the Rogues' chances for the League championship. Only a miracle could help them out now, he said. And

they didn't seem to be passing out any miracles, these days. He started to say something then about Babe Hamilton and the fracas between the two Rogue players, on the court, but Babe snapped the set off. He'd heard enough.

The next morning, after a restless night of fitful slumber, Babe Hamilton reported as usual to his job at the mine shaft. But just as he was about to go down, the foreman told him that he was wanted at the main office. John Herkimer, the big boss, wanted to see him.

A half hour later, Babe was walking across the deep rug of the president's office, in the main building of the mining company. John Herkimer was a tall, stooped, stern-visaged man, with a slightly crooked nose, deeply sunken eyes and a seamed mouth. He had a long, flowing mane of snow white hair. He sat erect at his desk and his eyes fastened onto Babe's and held them from the moment the basketball player stepped into the office.

Babe stopped in front of the desk and stood there, stiffly. "You wanted to see me, sir?" he said.

Old John Herkimer's lined face showed no trace of emotion. He opened a drawer, reached in and pulled out a pink check. He held it out, scissored between his fingers, to Babe. In his cracked, gruff voice, he said: "This represents two weeks notice, Hamilton. Your services are no longer required in my mines."

BABE'S MOUTH dropped. He stared at the check, finally reached out and took it from the old man's trembling fingers. "I—I don't think I understand, Mr. Herkimer," he said, weakly. "I had the impression my work was satisfactory."

"It was," Herkimer said. "You're getting the sack because of what happened last night, down at the Armory. Plus the way you've been taken over the ropes by that conniving Dorman family."

"You mean I'm being fired because of an incident that happened on the basketball court—that has nothing to

do with my job at all."

"Not exactly. It *does* have to do with your job. I had high hopes for you, Hamilton. But you let me down. You don't have the stuff it takes for a man to get ahead in the mining business. A good coal man doesn't blow his top in a tight spot. He's not stupid. He doesn't let himself get taken in by the slick machinations of a tribe called the Dortermans. Beating the Dukes, having your team take the League championship, meant a lot to me, Hamilton. You've ruined all hope of that, for me—and for everybody else. And all because you've let Al and Jean Dorberman make a fool out of you."

Babe shook his head, bewildered. "What are you talking about, sir?" He said, dazed. "In what way did Al and Jean Dorberman make a jackass out of me?"

The old mining man shook his head impatiently. "I've been watching this thing right from the beginning. I know everything that's happened. You've let a pretty face and a charming manner hoodwink you, son. Don't you know that Jean Dorberman is as bad as her brother Al? Maybe worse?"

"In what way?" Babe demanded. He felt his pulses beginning to pound.

"She's crazy about that brother of hers, in the first place. They're as close as two peas in a pod. In the second place, she's an even greater snob than he is. She wouldn't have anything to do with a man like yourself, a man from the mines, an honest, hard working young man, under ordinary circumstances. But the Dorberman's mean to win the League title at any cost. So they went to work on you."

Slowly, what old man Herkimer was getting at, began to penetrate Babe's mind. He stood there silently, for a moment, then blurted: "You mean this whole thing was a put-up job? You mean that Al Dorberman, through Jean, has purposely caused trouble between the rest of the team and myself—between me and—and my girl, Lee Sutton?"

"Exactly," John Herkimer nodded

his white-maned head. "They figured it out, that without you—or with the Rogues battling among themselves—they'd play rotten basketball. If nothing else, their plan would cause a breakup between you and your girl friend. They knew your playing would be affected. That was all they needed. I don't think anybody needs to tell you that you're the keyman in the Rogues' championship chances. You saw what happened last night."

"Yeah," Babe admitted. "I think you've got something there, Mr. Herkimer. I'm beginning to get the whole picture, now. None of it was coincidence really. It was all perfectly planned. The way Jean got somebody to introduce us, the way she worked it so that I'd miss the bus and she'd have to drive me home. That night at Old Mill, she could have dropped some kind of a mickey into my drink when I wasn't looking. It all ties in." His eyes got bright and hard. "Can you prove any of that, though, Mr. Herkimer?"

"No," he said, brusquely. "Neither can you. They've been too clever." He picked up some papers from the top of his desk. "Sorry, Hamilton. I hate to take this extreme measure. But I have no respect for a man who lets himself be so easily duped. Too bad. As I say, I had high hopes for you—and for the Rogues."

HE DIDN'T look up again and Babe knew that the interview was definitely at an end. There was nothing else to do, but to turn and walk out.

His jaw began to jut a little and the line of his mouth to tighten, as he went out the gate. There was only one answer. If he could vindicate himself in some way, prove that he had been the victim of the Dorberman's scheme to wreck the Rogues' chance for the basketball League championship, he might still have a chance to square away the whole thing. He told himself that he would get that proof, if he had to wring it out of Jean Dorberman's pretty, lying throat with his bare hands. Or beat it out of Al with his fists.

At the front door of the Dorberman

mansion, a frozen-faced butler informed Babe that Miss Jean Dorterman wasn't at home. When Babe stuck his foot in the door and determinedly said that he'd wait until she got back, two husky, mean-eyed looking guys, with broken noses, with cigars jutting from the corners of their mouths, pushed in front of the butler.

Before Babe knew what was going on, they grabbed him by the arms and lifted him off his feet, propelled him across the porch. The biggest one said, around his cigar: "The lady said this jerk would probably come around looking for trouble. Well, he's found it."

Halfway down the drive toward the gate, Babe put up a fight and twisted one arm free and drove his fist toward one of the men's faces. The blow didn't land solidly, though, and before he could get in another whack, the second man hit him a ringing wallop behind the ear. For a few minutes, Babe fought the two plug-uglies with everything he had. But he was no match for their rough-and-tumble tactics or their combined strength. In no time at all, he was picking himself up off the street outside the estate, bruised and with his nose and mouth leaking blood. He hobbled off toward the car line and upset over this failure to try and get the truth out of the Dorterman's.

For the next few days, every attempt Babe made to try and contact either Al or Jean was frustrated. Everywhere either of them went, they were accompanied by the two body-guards. Babe even went to a West Side Dukes game and tried to get to Al, in the locker room. But the two mugs were there to stop him. The only satisfaction he had, was seeing the Dukes drop a game they should have won, which once again put them into a tie position with the Rogues for first place in the League, with both teams only holding a one-game margin over the nearest opposition. If the Rogues could win every game they played in the next few weeks, they might still get a crack at the Dukes for the playoff.

DURING THOSE next few weeks, Babe took a temporary job at the local hospital, as a laboratory assistant, on night duty, doing research work on the effect of coal dust and black damp on the respiratory systems of mine workers. It was a new field, one which he'd had some training in college and Babe found the work absorbing. It paid well and it helped him to get his mind off his trouble.

He couldn't help scanning the sports pages during that period, though, noting that the Rogues were holding on, were getting through game after game, by the skin of their teeth. And then the season was over. The Rogues and the Dukes were still deadlocked for first place in the League. The playoff game was scheduled.

HE SAT there, with his ear glued to the loudspeaker of the small receiving set, in an agony of suspense as the game got under way. Sweat broke out on his forehead and lip and he felt sick with futile helplessness, sitting there, unable to do anything about it, as the Dukes got off to a flying start and ran up six points before the Rogues even seemed to know what it was all about.

Coombs said something to him, but he couldn't hear it. The noise of the crowd, following some spectacular shot at the Armory, swelled from the loudspeaker and drowned out Coombs quiet voice. In disgust, Babe reached out and turned off the radio. Then he heard Coombs saying:

"—bad motor accident. She's in Emergency and seems to be delirious. They can't catch most of what she says, but every once in awhile, she keeps mentioning your name, Babe. They thought maybe you'd go up and see if you can make anything out of what she's saying."

Babe looked startled. He jumped up, grabbed Coombs' hand. "Who? Who's been hurt? Is—is it Lee? Lee Sutton?"

Coombs shook his bald head. "No, no, Babe. Miss Dorterman—Jean Dorterman. She cracked up her car badly

on the way to the game. I guess she was late and speeding. Anyhow, Morgan, here, says she's banged up pretty bad and—"

"She keeps mentioning my name?" Babe broke in. His heart began to pound. When Coombs nodded, Babe broke for the door. He grabbed the nurse's hand and yanked her flying down the hall after him, toward the emergency ward. Maybe he was crazy. Maybe there wouldn't be anything to this, but there was just the slightest chance.

THET EYES of the girl on the bed flickered for a moment and then opened. They were dull with pain, but then the light of recognition broke in them. "Hello, Babe Hamilton," she said, weakly. A twinge of pain took her and her face twisted. She looked around at them all, finally centered her eyes on the interne. "Doctor," she said, her voice tinged with fear. "Am I—am I going to—" She couldn't finish.

She turned her head slowly back so that her eyes met Babe's. She said, weakly: "The doc didn't answer me, Babe. I—I guess that doesn't mean things are so good. Yes, Babe, I—I do have something to say to you. I—well—I did you a terrible wrong, Babe. You had that nice little blonde girl. I—I didn't want to do it. Al—he—Al made me. He's always been able to make me do anything he wanted."

She began to talk faster, then. She spilled out the whole story and it was pretty much as old John Herkimer had figured. But Jean filled in a few blank spots. She told how Jinx O'Hare had been in on it. For a big sum of money, Jinx had agreed to help them. He had started the stories circulating about Babe and Jean, building up on the actual facts, making them sound worse. He had taken every opportunity to stir things up against Babe. It was he who had suggested to Lee that she accept a date with Al to try to shock Babe to his senses.

When she was finished, Babe glanced at his watch. Then he rushed toward the door. He called back: "Tell Mr. Coombs I had to go. I'll make up to him for this." At the

door, he grabbed the arm of Miss Morgan, the nurse. "You heard what the girl said, didn't you?"

The nurse nodded and Babe pulled her with him out into the hall. At first she protested that she couldn't go along with him to act as witness to Jean Dorberman's confession. But Babe pleaded with the head nurse and Miss Morgan was allowed to take her relief period early. They cabbed over to the Armory, went in the back way. While he went into the locker room, Babe sent Miss Morgan along toward the court, with orders to find Doc Wimmer and tell him the story.

Hurriedly, Babe undressed and climbed into his uniform, looking at his watch all the time. Roughly he figured there were about six minutes of the second half to go. If the score wasn't too lopsided, they might still pull the championship game out of the fire with a little luck and some hotshot playing on the part of all the Rogues:

Babe Hamilton bounded out onto the court and the Armory suddenly became a bedlam of noise, from the jam-packed Rogues' side of the court. The other side, crammed with West Side well-to-do, was silent. Babe saw Al Dorberman staring at him, suddenly growing pale. Dorberman's eyes almost popped out of his head. But Babe ignored him. He looked up at the score board. It was 48-40, for the Dukes. He looked at the clock. A little over four minutes to go. Four minutes and eight big points.

Harry Forbes was first to get the big round leather. On the move, he tossed to Hap Steiner. Steiner fast-dribbled to a few steps, pivoted, and made an underhand pass to Linc Hoffman. Linc moved down the court, drawing several Dukes men after him, away from Babe, who was back near the center but in good scoring position. Then Linc stopped abruptly and made an overhead back-pass to Babe who was standing free and clear with plenty of time to shoot.

Babe got a good grip on the ball, bent his knees, arched out his arms, and the leather curved lazily up through the lights in a straight arc

toward the basket. It hit the backboard at an angle and splashed clean down through the hoop. The Rogues were off.

AT THE next center jump, Babe tapped the ball halfway down the court to Harry Forbes, who confounded the Dukes guard, covering him, with a clever feint as though he was going to move down the court with a fast dribble. But instead he spun on one foot and made a swift overhand toss toward the basket. That overhand shot was Forbes' specialty. For a moment the crowd and the Rogues held their breath, though. The shot didn't hit clean. It bobbed for a moment, rolled around the rim of the hop, then tumbled lazily in for a score.

The crowd was going crazy now, trying to keep up with the lightning-like play on the court and the slow, steady moving of the clock hands toward the finish time. With a little less than two minutes to go, the Rogues still had to make five points or better, to take the game.

They rushed the Dukes off their feet. They were like quicksilver. There was suddenly black magic all over the court. Sometimes Babe himself couldn't follow the ball as it went through a series of intricate trick plays. And then he would suddenly find it shooting toward him and he was in position to score. There was then still another two points to go, and with less than a minute to play. Babe went into what he knew would be the final tap-off for this period. He just barely outjumped the Duke's center, lightly pushed the ball toward Stan Kovak, the guard.

Kovak confused the Dukes by wheeling and dribbling fast up along their end of the court, away from his own basket. As four of the Dukes took off after him, in amazement, Kovak suddenly stopped and spun, heaved the ball back to Babe, standing in midcourt, free and clear.

Babe caught it clean and started

down toward the Dukes' basket. There was only one man between him and the backboard. It was Al Dorterman, the Dukes' left forward. Babe dribbled straight toward him. Just before he reached Al, Babe feinted as if to pivot around him. But at the last second, instead, he tossed the ball over Al's head and swerved around him. He caught the ball on the first bounce and tore down under the backboard. His feet left the ground and he reached up and tipped the ball into the net, just as the gun sounded for the end of the period. But the score was tied, 48-48.

There wasn't much to it after that. The Dukes were licked right then and there. The extra period didn't do them a bit of good. The Rogues kept up their whirlwind attack and the Dukes were bushed. In a last desperate attempt to stem the Rogues scoring tide, the Dukes tried to rough up Babe Hamilton. He was just in the mood for that, and the Dukes got back as good as they gave.

After the game, in the locker room, the whole team apologized to Babe for having doubted his loyalty. Outside the Armory, he found Doc Wimmer and Lee Sutton waiting for him, along with old John Herkimer. The old man shook Babe's hand and told him that they could use a good foreman in shaft Four, if he wanted to show up for the work Monday morning. He also told him, winking at Lee, that he'd see to it that they got the first apartment in the new housing project. The one nearest the kiddies' playground, he said, and everybody laughed.

It was a long walk home from the Armory for Babe and Lee, and cold. But they didn't seem to mind. As a matter of fact, it was almost Spring to them. And they weren't walking down a barren coaltown side street, in near zero weather. They were strolling along a blossom-canopied lane. That's how it was with Babe and Lee, that winter night when everything was suddenly all right again.



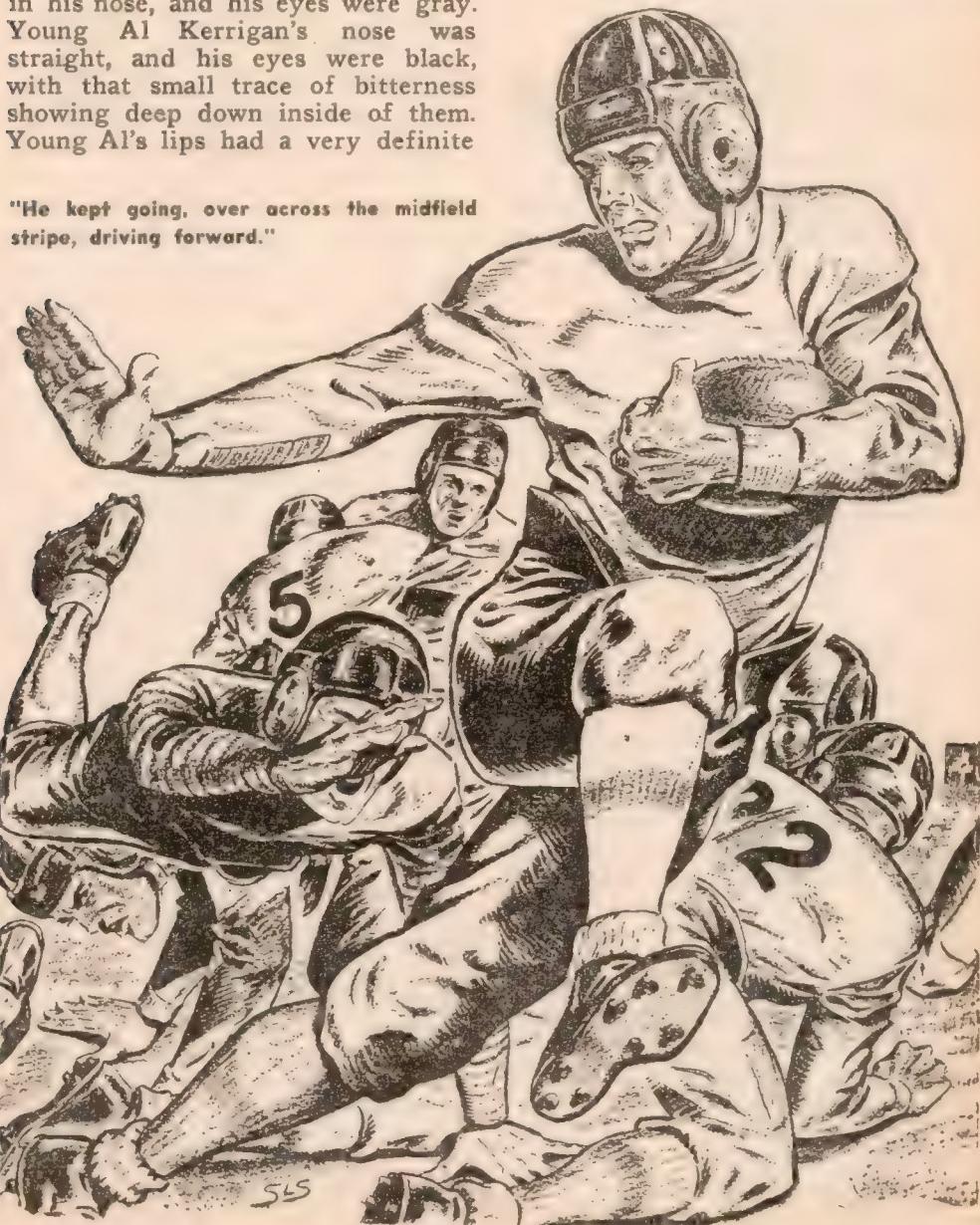
GRID KID FROM HELL'S KITCHEN

By GEORGE KILRAIN

THEY SAT side by side on the bench, sheepskin coats up around their necks, dark heads protruding from the heavily-lined collars. Chris Kerrigan had a dent in his nose, and his eyes were gray. Young Al Kerrigan's nose was straight, and his eyes were black, with that small trace of bitterness showing deep down inside of them. Young Al's lips had a very definite

sardonic curve to them—something he'd acquired through the years, a heritage from the West Side of town.

Chris Kerrigan glanced at his brother out of the corner of his eyes,



"He kept going, over across the midfield stripe, driving forward."

UP OUT OF THE SLUMS, THESE BROTHERS BATTERED THEIR WAY TO GLORY, LUGGING LEATHER EVERY YARD—NOVELET!

and then looked across the field to the forty-yard stripe where the second string Wyndham U. backs were struggling to advance the ball against a fairly tough Tech line.

"They got no guts," Al said softly. "No damn drive to them."

"Shut up," Chris whispered. They were at the end of the bench, but there were other Wyndham men close at hand, and coach Amos Craig stood less than a dozen feet away talking with a Wyndham lineman about to go into the game.

"If he wants points," Al went on grimly, "let him put football players

out on the field."

"You can't play every minute," Chris murmured. "He'll put us back in at the end of the quarter."

Al Kerrigan relapsed into moody silence again, and Chris stared at Amos Craig's back, telling himself for the fiftieth time since Al had entered Wyndham that the brother had to change his ways. Already, half the Wyndham players had taken a definite dislike to Al. He spoke his mind, and if he didn't speak it he showed it in other ways.

Chris knew that the next year, after he'd graduated, it would be worse;



Chris Kerrigan was a pigskin knight on horseback, riding to glory to the cheers of thousands—Al Kerrigan was the man on foot, slogging his way to a muddy victory with only the bitterness of the slums to carry him down the field!

and the following year, Al Kerrigan would be the most unpopular man on the Wyndham campus, and the kid didn't want to be. It was his way.

The third quarter ended with Wyndham on their own forty-two, bucking futilely at the Tech line. Amos Criag turned and pointed his finger at the two Wyndham backs. Chris and Al stood up, Al muttering to himself, First-string quarterback, Jay McAfee, was going in also, and the right half, Leonard Chadwick.

Slipping on the shining brown Wyndham helmet, Chris trotted past Amos Craig and received a slap on the back from the gray-haired coach. Craig didn't slap Al's back.

They raced across the turf, the four first-string backs, lining up in the huddle with McAfee studying the Tech set-up. Chris, at the fullback slot, heard Al clearing his throat several times, and he knew the kid was nervous—would be nervous until the first play was run off. He knew Al; he'd taken care of Al when they were small children on the West Side of town—the wrong side. He'd fought Al's battles because he'd been three years older and there had been no other Kerrigans.

McAfee called for No. 12-A, an offtackle slant, Chris Kerrigan carrying. They were running out the "T," with Chris up at the head of the letter, and Al and Chadwick on the wings. The man-in-motion was Chadwick to the left.

McAfee took the ball from center, faked to Al crossing over, and then handed it to Chris Kerrigan darting out wide. Chris shot out wide and then cut in toward right tackle. He found his hole and he went in low, driving with every ounce in his two-hundred-pound body.

He was veering off toward the sidelines as he went through, away from the Tech line backers. He got up to the forty-eight before the first man hit him, but he kept going, over across the midfield stripe, solid legs driving him forward to the Tech forty-seven, before two others swung in from the right to knock him out of bounds.

HE HEARD the noise in the stands as he got up. He saw McAfee grinning at him in approval. Len Chadwick gave him a hand to his feet.

"We'll bottle this up right now," Chadwick chuckled.

"Why not," Chris said. He saw Al glowering at a Tech man a half-dozen yards away and he headed in that direction just in time to hear Al say tersely,

"Try that again, kid, and I'll knock all your teeth down in your belly."

The Tech man, a stocky red-head, was about to reply when Chris grabbed Al's arm and herded him away.

"He tried to trip me up," Al was saying. "I'll knock his damned head off." He didn't say it softly, and several Wyndham players heard the remark. They looked at Al Kerrigan queerly.

"Let it go," Chris said wearily. He'd been trying to drum it into Al's head for weeks that Wyndham was not the tough Bolton mill town, and the Wyndham campus was not the West Side where a man's courage was measured by the smallness of the affront to which he'd take exception.

"Nobody's pushing me around," Al Kerrigan stated flatly. "Let's remember that, Chris."

"You never let a man forget it," Chris told him. He didn't entirely blame the kid. Al was younger and those days in Bolton had made their impression. They'd had to be tough to survive, and Al had had to live there for three years after Chris left to attend Wyndham.

They were in the huddle again, and McAfee was saying, looking at the ground:

"All yours Al. No. 21-W."

Al Kerrigan hit around right end, Chris and Chadwick leading him. They cut out wide and Chris had to put on the pressure to keep ahead of the younger brother. Al Kerrigan carried one hundred and eight-five pounds and he carried it fast.

They swung wide and Chris

plunged in front of the Tech quarterback, knocking his feet from beneath him. Al went down the sideline, picking up speed with each step. Watching him, Chris grinned proudly. When Al arrived at Wyndham Chris hadn't imagined his brother could have improved so much. Back in Bolton Al had been a spindly kid, all arms and legs—willing, but always lacking the strength and drive to make headway with a football. During his last year at Bolton High, Al had put on weight.

Very cleverly, Al faked the Tech safety man in toward center, and then cut out again toward the sideline, moving past him with another burst of speed. The kid made thirty yards on the play before they caught up with him as he moved in toward the middle.

The red-headed Tech lineman, following up the play down the field, was in on the tackle, and Chris saw them go down hard. Al wriggled loose, his helmet having rolled from his head, black hair mussed.

Chris headed for him in sprint fashion, but arrived a fraction of a second too late. The red-headed boy had made a remark, and Al's right fist lashed out from the waist. The red-head dropped to the ground as if he'd been shot.

The big Wyndham center and captain, George Pollock, held Al's arms, preventing him from going after another man who had been in on that tackle.

"He asked for it," Al was saying. "He got it."

"Now you got it," the referee told him. "Get off the field."

Al Kerrigan's lips were twisted in a crooked grin as he slouched toward the bench. Chris saw him walk past Amos Craig, but the Wyndham coach didn't talk to him. Two weeks before, against Colburn, Al Kerrigan had been ejected from the field for fighting.

"Too bad, Chris," McAfee said. McAfee was a senior also, and Chris had played with him for three seasons at

Wyndham.

"He has a temper," Chris said slowly. "He'll have to get over it." He knew though that it was more than that. Al Kerrigan had a tough streak in him, something which had been born in him. It would have to come out, or he'd end up behind the eight-ball.

IT HAD taken a lot of persuasion to get Al to come to Wyndham in the first place. Al had taken a good job in one of the factories and he'd been making money—spending it, too, around the local pool rooms, playing the horses, the 'numbers'.

"You'll end up a corner bum," Chris had told him quietly. "Come on out with me. I'll get you a part-time job, You'll have some spending money in your pockets, and you'll be getting an education. You'll go somewhere."

"Where?" Al wanted to know. "With the swells? To hell with 'em."

They beat Tech by a 28 to 6 score, Chris going over twice for touchdown. Amos Craig was satisfied with the work of his eleven. In the dressing room the Wyndham coach said quietly:

"We've won four straight. This is one of the finest looking Wyndham squads I've ever coached. Keep your heads and we're in for a great season."

Chris Kerrigan sat on his stool, tying his shoelaces, staring at the floor. His last year at Wyndham he wanted it to be his best; he'd planned on it all during the previous summer; he'd had pictures in mind of Al and himself leading Wyndham through an undefeated season. Al wasn't in the dressing room now. The sophomore sensation had showered before the other men came in and ducked quickly. Chris had an idea where the younger brother had gone.

"He gets sore pretty quickly," George Pollock observed. "He doesn't have your disposition, Chris."

"He'll get over it," Chris grinned. "Don't worry about it, George."

"Okay," Pollock nodded, but Chris knew the big center didn't particularly like this business. The entire Wyndham squad was depending upon

the four starting backfield men to carry them through this year. The Wyndham line was good, experienced men; the Wyndham first-string backs were already gaining the reputation of the best in the East, and Amos Craig was depending upon them. Al Kerrigan was being counted on to run the end while Chris hit at the line. With Al out of the game the threat to the wings ended, and the opposing line could bunch in on Chris coming through the center and the tackle spots.

Amos Craig stopped Chris on the way out of the dressing room. The big, gray-haired coach drew the full-back into a corner and spoke to him earnestly, the worry showing plainly in his blue eyes.

"I don't want to be hard on the boy, Chris," he said quietly, "but he'll have to get over this business."

"It's not good," Chris admitted. "I'll talk to him, Mr. Craig."

He didn't find Al in his room, and the younger brother didn't show up until after one in the morning. Chris heard him coming in and he sat up in bed, jaw tight. He heard Al bump into a chair, and then the sophomore's low curse.

"Put the light on," Chris said tersely.

Al Kerrigan snapped on the light and then sat down on his own bed, a surly, defiant grin on his face.

"Go ahead, grandpa," he said.

"That's a hell of a way to come home," Chris told him. He could see from Al's eyes that the younger man had a few drinks in him. "You've been to the Black Diamond," Chris growled. "What's her name?"

"Fredericka," Al Kerrigan grinned, "and so what?"

"So I'll have a little talk with her," Chris growled.

"Stay the hell out of there," Al told him.

"Try and stop me," Chris snapped. He watched Al reach up and switch off the light, and then he lay in the darkness for a long while. Al finally said softly:

"Kid, you're going a little too far with me."

SUNDAY afternoon Chris boarded a street car and rode to the end of town. It was only a short walk thence out to the Black Diamond roadhouse. The Black Diamond was much frequented by Wyndham students. There were dancing hostesses, drinks, and some gambling to be done in the back room. The Black Diamond was run by Darcy Haines, a big time gambler with a reputation.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the Black Diamond was deserted. Chris found the parking lot empty and the front door still closed, with a placard up, indicating that the establishment opened at five o'clock.

Walking around to a side door, Chris went into the big dance hall. A bartender was polishing glasses at the end of the circular bar. Another man was mopping the floor. Chris said to this man:

"Where can I find a girl by the name of Fredericka?"

The man grinned. "Speak to Mr. Haines," he said. He nodded toward an open doorway where a small, thin, blond-haired man stood watching him, a cigarette in his mouth, slate-colored eyes half-closed.

Chris walked toward him. He said, "There's a girl by the name of Fredericka I'd like to talk to."

Darcy Haines nodded. He had small hands like a woman and he was immaculately dressed.

"Business?" he asked.

"You can call it that," Chris said.

"You're Kerrigan of the Wyndham eleven," Haines said. "I've met your brother."

"He's been here," Chris said shortly.

"You don't come in very often, yourself," Haines observed.

"You blame me?" Chris asked him.

Haines shrugged and grinned. "Maybe you're the wise one," he said. "I'll call my sister."

Chris lifted his eyebrows. He'd thought all along that young Al had been making up to one of the girls in the establishment. The owner's sister was a different matter.

"Your brother has been in here," Haines stated, "not at my invitation. I never invite any kids from the school

down here but I can't keep them out. They're over twenty-one."

Chris considered this fact carefully, while studying Haines' face. He remembered hearing stories that Darcy Haines bet heavily on the Wyndham games, but aside from that he knew practically nothing of the man.

"Step inside," Haines said.

Chris sat down in a luxurious leather chair. He got up a few moments later when a dark-haired girl came into the room, smiling quizzically. She held out her hand.

"I'm glad to know Al's brother," she said. "He's told me about you."

Chris Kerrigan blinked. They were alone in the room, her brother not having come back with her. He didn't quite know how to begin this. He'd expected an entirely different set-up.

"I—I've been kind of worried about Al," he stumbled. She had violet-colored eyes, and she did not wear a great deal of make-up. Chris went off on a new tack forgetting what he had come to say. "You don't dance here do you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I sing occasionally for Darcy," she admitted, "and I handle his bookkeeping."

"Bookkeeping," Chris muttered. He scratched his chin dubiously.

"I took it up in school," Fredericka Haines grinned. "I like it."

Chris Kerrigan nodded. He rubbed his hands together and he looked at the floor. He said lamely, "Al came in a bit late last night and he'd had a few drinks in him. I—I"

“YOU WERE worried," Fredericka finished for him. "I don't blame you. He didn't do any drinking here. He must have gotten it on the way home."

Chris started at her incredulously, and the girl went on unabashed.

"My brother backs Wyndham in every game they play," she smiled. "He'd never sell liquor to a Wyndham football player."

"I see," Chris muttered. "I've been barking up the wrong tree altogether."

"It's better that you dropped in," Fredericka told him. "At least your

mind will be clear."

Chris nodded morosely. "I know now that Al won't get into trouble at the Black Diamond," he said, "if that helps any."

Fredericka Haines sat down on the chair near her brother's desk. "He's pretty wild, isn't he?" she asked quietly.

"He's a good kid," Chris told her. He saw the knowing smile on her face and he added, "He's wild, too."

"And you can't keep him in line," Fredericka said thoughtfully. "You've been father and mother, and sister and brother."

"Aunt and uncle also," Chris growled. "He's a tough one."

"Maybe," Fredericka suggested, "you've used the wrong approach. I took some psychology in college."

"I don't get it," Chris said.

"Let him worry about you for a change," the girl smiled. "Give him a little responsibility. Maybe that's what has been wrong all the time."

"Why should he worry about me?" Chris asked, mystified. "He wouldn't have any reason—"

"Give him a reason," Fredericka said. "Al likes you. He'd do anything for you. If you started to get into trouble, he'd fight the devil to help you."

Chris nodded. "You might have something," he said slowly, "but Al's no man's fool. He's as smart as a whip and he'd see through this business quickly enough."

"Are you a fool?" Fredericka Haines asked him. "I've heard you were a Phi Beta Kappa man."

Chris Kerrigan grinned. "We might work something out after all," he murmured. "Can I count on you and your brother?"

"Darcy," Fredericka smiled, "is a Wyndham alumnus at heart. He gets sick to the stomach when the Wyndham eleven loses a game."

"I might be a little sick myself," Chris said quietly, "before this business is over."

Fredericka said, "Al was telling me he was all set to quit school. Did you know that?"

"I knew it was coming to that," Chris scowled. "I'll have to go to

work immediately. When does the bar open?"

The girl's eyes widened. "You don't mean?" she began.

Chris was nodding grimly. "I couldn't fake a drunk with Al. It'll have to be the real thing."

"But—but," Fredericka stammered, "somebody else might see you on the campus, and you have a reputation."

"Believe I'll have to chance it," Chris stated. "When I'm fairly plastered, ask your brother to call up Al and get him down here."

"Anything else?" Fredericka gulped.

"Might be better," Chris said, "if your brother kind of hid me in a private room here after I got drunk. Make it look as if Darcy were trying to shield me. He could tell Al I got the stuff outside and staggered in here."

"I—I'd better call Darcy," Fredericka muttered.

"And in the meanwhile," Chris Kerrigan grinned, "I'll make some final preparations before going into my act. You might call it the last will and testament of the old Chris Kerrigan."

AT NINE o'clock in the evening Al Kerrigan burst into one of the back rooms of the Black Diamond. He was hatless, and his tie was awry. Chris Kerrigan was stretched out on a couch, snoring peacefully. His hair was mussed and his face flushed with drink. He awoke with a slight start when Al shut the door behind him.

"What the hell goes here?" Al grated. He was looking at Darcy Haines sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"He didn't get that package in here," Haines stated mildly. "When I saw him stumble in, I had one of the boys grab him and hide him out here. He's been sleeping for half an hour. Thought I'd better call you up."

Al Kerrigan walked over to the couch and sat down on the edge of it. Chris rubbed his eyes and yawned. He grinned when Al bent down low and sniffed.

"How's it, kid?" he chuckled.

"He's got a bender on," Al muttered. "I never saw Chris take a drink before."

"Maybe," Darcy Haines smiled, "you set him too good an example, Al."

"I have to get him home," Al Kerrigan mumbled. "I don't want anybody to see this guy. They got him up on a pedestal back on the campus."

"It wouldn't be too good," Haines agreed. "That's what I figured when I hid him back here. You know me, where Wyndham is concerned."

"Call me a cab," Al said slowly. "I'll try to sneak him up to his room."

"Get smart," Haines said. "Let him sleep some more of it off. Bring him home later when the other guys have gone to bed."

"Sure," Al muttered.

Chris Kerrigan took a bottle from his coat pocket. It was a pint bottle, and already half empty.

"Have a drink," he grinned at Al. "This is on me."

"I—I don't get it," Al Kerrigan was saying dumbly. "This guy never touched anything—even back home. The other guys used to laugh at him."

Haines nodded knowingly. "I've seen them get that way before," he stated. "It's the strain. Sometimes too much study does it. Maybe he's been worrying about the football team."

"You're nuts," Chris Kerrigan said to the gambler. He got off the couch and stumbled across the room to a closet. He was taking down a glass when Al Kerrigan snatched the bottle from his hand.

"That's enough, Chris," Al said grimly. "I don't want you to flow home tonight."

"He's cracked open at the seams," Darcy Haines was saying. "It's a shame." He added thoughtfully, "And I got two grand on Wyndham in next weeks game with Overton."

Chris Kerrigan was looking at Al stupidly. He said, "What in hell's the joke, kid? Hand back that bottle."

"You'll get it over my dead body," Al growled. He said to Haines, "You'd better call that cab now. I'm

getting him to bed as soon as possible."

Haines shrugged and went out of the room. Chris sat down heavily in the chair Haines had vacated, and Al stood in front of him, shaking his head.

"What happened, Chris?" he asked finally. "I don't get this."

"So I had a few drinks," Chris mumbled. "What's the difference?"

"It'll make a lot of difference," Al stated, "if you're seen. You're regarded as a model student at this damned school."

"Can I eat that when I get out of here?" Chris asked grimly. "Who's worrying about me then?"

"That's not the point," Al told him. "You'll have to cut this out, kid."

"You giving me orders, brother?" Chris chuckled. "You can go right to hell with yourself."

THEY GOT out of the cab at a dark side street half a block from the dormitory. Al shoved Chris to the inside and hurried him up toward the steps. Two students were chatting a few feet from the door, but they passed by them hurriedly, Al literally dragging Chris with him.

They were going up the steps to the second floor when a big, gray-haired man swung around the landing and started down toward them. It was Amos Craig.

Chris Kerrigan, his face still flushed with drink, eyes wild, straightened up abruptly, and in doing so nearly lost his balance and fell backward. Al Kerrigan let out a short exclamation and yanked him back to safety.

Amos Craig came down the steps slowly, chill blue eyes wide with amazement. He looked at Al and then at Chris. Al said gruffly:

"Good evening, Mr. Craig."

Amos Craig nodded. Chris saw him sniff, and then the Wyndham coach said quietly:

"I believe, you've been drinking, Kerrigan." He was looking straight at Chris as he said it. He added, "I'm quite surprised."

Chris Kerrigan took a deep breath. He had sobered up abruptly. He said, "I—I'm sorry, Mr. Craig."

Amos Craig's lips were tight. "Go on up to your room and sleep it off," he said. "I hope no one else has seen you, Kerrigan. This wouldn't help the morale of the team."

The big man went past them then, his jaw set as hard as iron, and the slight trace of bewilderment showing plainly in his eyes.

"You see what I mean?" Al grated when they were going along the second floor landing toward their room. He fumbled with the key and then shoved Chris into the room, locking the door behind him.

Chris Kerrigan sat down on the bed and started to yank at the tie. He was staring straight across the room at the opposite wall.

"Craig saw me drunk," he muttered. "I never thought it would work out that way, kid."

Al Kerrigan looked at him suspiciously. "What way, Chris?" he asked.

"Okay," Chris muttered, "you might as well know the whole story, kid. I planned this drunk to sort of straighten you out."

"Me?" Al gaped.

"I thought," Chris explained, "that if I started to get into trouble myself, and you had to pull me out, it would give you a sense of responsibility. You wouldn't be running so free yourself if you had me to worry about. It kind of keeps a man in line."

Al Kerrigan sat down on a chair at his desk. His mouth was open and he was nodding his head.

"That sounds like you, Chris," he said. "You didn't figure on running into Craig the first time out."

"No," Chris muttered. "That was the last thing. I asked Darcy Haines to call you up and get you down so that you could take me home without anyone seeing me. I thought it would be just between the two of us."

"He won't talk about it," Al said, "and one little bender shouldn't ruin you as a football player. Craig will forget all about it after we wipe up Overton."

"Sure," Chris muttered, "but it leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Craig used to trust me implicitly. He won't now."

"So what?" Al growled. "He's got you in the fullback slot. You're still making scores for him."

"We'll hope it works out all right," Chris said dully, "but I don't like it."

"That's what happens," Al grinned, "when you start worrying about me, kid. Just forget about it. I can take care of myself."

At the football practice the next afternoon, Amos Craig said nothing to Chris when he came into the dressing room, Al at his side. He gave them both long glances and then walked through the door to the field.

AFTER THE practice session was over Craig went into his office, closing the door behind him. When Al and Chris had showered and were drying themselves, Craig opened the door and motioned them to come in.

"Here it comes," Al growled. "I expected a bawling out."

Chris Kerrigan slipped on his trousers without a word. They went into the office a few moments later. Amos Craig was standing by the window, his broad back toward them. The Wyndham coach said quietly:

"I was greatly disappointed in you last night, Chris. What happened?"

"I had a few drinks," Chris admitted. "I don't know what started me off. It was the wrong thing." He saw his brother Al scowling from the side.

"I understand," Craig went on, "that you've been to the Black Diamond several times. You've been seen there."

Al Kerrigan's eyes widened. He stared queerly at Chris.

"I have been there," Chris admitted again.

"And you know Darcy Haines, the gambler?" Craig said tersely.

"I've met him," Chris said.

"You know that Haines is supposed to back Wyndham in most of its games?" Craig went on.

"I know that," Chris said.

"But you don't know," Craig told

him, "that suddenly Haines switched his money to Overton in Saturday's game?"

"What the hell does that mean?" Al Kerrigan suddenly blurted out.

"I don't know," Amos Craig snapped. "Only I don't like it when my star backs become too friendly with known gamblers, and I find one of them drunk."

"I'm sorry about that," Chris stated. "I assure you it won't happen again."

"I hope not," Craig told him, "for the good of yourself and Wyndham."

On the way out of the gymnasium Al Kerrigan said grimly, "I didn't know you were acquainted with Darcy Haines, Chris."

Chris shrugged. "We're not the best of friends, Al," he stated. "I've just met him."

"And Fredericka?" Al asked quietly.

"I've met her, too," Chris smiled. "What does she mean to you, Al?"

"She's a nice girl," Al stated. "That's all there is to it."

They walked on in silence toward the campus, and then Al said bitterly, "It's a hell of a business when the coach doesn't trust you. Now he's worried about that Overton game. We'll lick hell out of Overton. Maybe that will satisfy him."

"The only way," Chris Kerrigan agreed. "I'm wondering how Craig discovered Haines switched his bets for this one."

OVERTON had a big team and a good record when they took the field the following Saturday afternoon against the Wyndham Beavers. Overton had lost its opener, and then came back to win three straight by terrific margins. The red and gold team was raring to go.

Chris Kerrigan stood on the five-yard line, rubbing his hands, watching Al out of the corner of his eyes.

"Watch that fighting," he whispered when Al walked over toward him immediately before the kick-off.

"Don't worry," Al grinned. "We're

going to lay it on thick this afternoon."

Overton kicked off and Al took the ball on the goal line. The half-back sprinted up the left side of the field, with Chris and Chadwick up in front of him. Chris knocked one Overton man down, and then watched Al speed up the side line to the thirty-five before he was knocked out-of-bounds by two Overton tacklers. The thirty-five yard run-back had brought the Wyndham crowd to its feet, howling.

In the first huddle McAfee said, "Your ball, Chris, 8-A."

The man-in-motion was Al Kerrigan, to the left. Chris took the ball from McAfee, whirled, and spun into the crack between right guard and tackle. He went through very hard, head down, going from the thirty-five to the forty-two, seven yards, before the Overton fullback met him head-on.

They went down very hard, and the ball spun from Chris's hands, bobbling away toward the sidelines. Fortunately, a Wyndham lineman recovered.

In the next huddle, McAfee said, "Hang onto it, Butterfingers." He was grinning as he said it, but Al Kerrigan was glancing toward the sidelines where Amos Craig stood, face shaded under the brim of his hat.

Chris looked at Al and shook his head in disgust. He saw the slight frown on Al's face. Chadwick went over to tackle for a first down on the next play, and Al Kerrigan had a chance to say something. He whispered to Chris as he went by.

"Careful, kid. You know how bad that makes it look."

"The damned thing slipped," Chris growled. "I thought I had a good grip on it."

Al shook his head. "It should happen this afternoon," he muttered, "when Craig is watching you like a hawk."

"It won't happen again," Chris vowed.

Wyndham went over for a score six minutes later, Al Kerrigan bucking his way from the five, hitting over

guard, and going through like a thunderbolt. An Overton lineman caught him in the face with an open hand as he went through, and Chris saw the younger brother's eyes go wild. He started toward him when Al picked himself from the ground in the end zone, but Al only said:

"A wise guy."

"Stay in this ball game," Chris whispered. "Craig's all set to chuck you out, too, if you start any trouble."

"Thought I'd stay in this afternoon," Al told him. "I'll let one of these donkeys start the swinging."

Chadwick scored the second touchdown at the start of the second quarter, taking a short pass from McAfee on the goal line. The vaunted Overton line was not proving as tough as it had been cracked up to be. With Al Kerrigan and Chadwick hitting around the ends and through the line they marched nearly eighty yards for the score, McAfee throwing from the six when Overton stiffened.

CHRIS KERRIGAN couldn't get started. Twice he slipped, plunging through the line, although the footing was excellent. At the start of the second quarter Craig sent in Johnson, relief fullback. Chris left the field, a small frown on his face. He walked past Amos Craig without a word and sat down on the bench, wrapping himself in the sheepskin coat.

When Al came in for a rest near the end of the second period, with the score 14 to 0 for Wyndham, Chris said quietly:

"Looks kind of bad, doesn't it?"

"Every guy has a bad afternoon," Al growled. "You didn't get started yet, Chris."

"Funny thing," Chris observed. "I should fall down this afternoon with Craig suspecting something funny."

"He better not say anything," Al Kerrigan grated.

"He can think," Chris said slowly. "That's bad enough, and Johnson is in the game now. What does that mean?"

"You'll catch on the next half," Al vowed. "We'll make old Craig eat his words and his thoughts."

"Sure," Chris said.

The second half he got off to a worse start than in the first. The astonished Wyndham crowd watched him take the ball from McAfee and start toward right tackle with it. Instead of ripping through the fairly good-sized hole the Wyndham line opened up for him, he veered away from an imaginary tackler, headed out toward the end, and was downed behind the line of scrimmage by the Overton left end. It was a four yard loss.

"Damn it," Al Kerrigan whispered. "What's happened, Chris?"

Chris shook his head in bewilderment. "I'm thinking of Craig all the time," he muttered. "It has me off my game." He glanced toward the sidelines and he saw Amos Craig watching him, stony-faced. In the huddle McAfee grinned,

"We got to carry this All-American fullback today, boys. He's a stumble-bum." Everybody laughed but Al and Chris Kerrigan. "No, offense, Chris," McAfee said hastily.

"It's all right," Chris told him. "Let's go."

Wyndham scored again in the third quarter, Al Kerrigan breaking loose from the Overton forty-five and sprinting the distance to the goal line. Al ran like a wild horse through the Overton defense, ramming his way past three men on the four-yard line.

"He can't say both of us are playing it crooked," Chris smiled, on the way back up the field. "You stay in there for the honor of the Kerrigans, kid."

Chris came out of the game five minutes later after another costly fumble which gave Overton the ball on the Wyndham thirty. With a 21 to 0 lead, Amos Craig called out Al Kerrigan also.

The brothers trotted toward the bench, Al's jaw set in tight lines. As they passed Craig, the Wyndham coach looked straight at Chris. He said briefly:

"Not so good this afternoon, Kerrigan."

Chris shook his head. He didn't get back into the game any more, but Al went in with six minutes left

in the ball game. Young Al again shook himself loose from the thirty-five and pounded down the side lines for another score. It was 27 to 3 for Wyndham at the finish.

That night Chris Kerrigan came in drunk, not badly, but with enough in him to put the flush on his face. He managed to get back to the room without anyone seeing him, but Al was dazed. He helped Chris out of his clothes and got him under the cold shower.

"What's got into you, kid?" he asked anxiously. "You know what Craig will do if he catches you again."

"To hell with Craig," Chris said good-naturedly. "Let him worry about his team. I'm through."

"Through?" Al echoed.

"Thought I'd quit school," Chris told him. "I'm fed up with it. Nothing works out right."

"But—but you've only got a few months to go," Al muttered, "and you want that degree."

"I'll go back to Bolton," Chris said. "That's my town."

"You're nuts," Al growled. "Nuttier than a loon. There's nothing in Bolton for you," he added bitterly. "And this business all started because of me."

"Craig had no right accusing me," Chris muttered. "I never took any money from Darcy Haines."

"Craig can't prove anything," Al Kerrigan snapped. "He's talking through his hat."

"He doesn't have to prove anything," Chris said wearily. "He just stands pat."

THEY WERE getting ready for the Eastern game the following Saturday, and then Leeville, and finally the big one with the Mustangs from State. Chris Kerrigan missed his first football practice two days before the Eastern game. At six o'clock in the evening Al Kerrigan broke into the Black Diamond and found him standing at the bar. Fredericka Haines was with him.

The girl shook her head at Al when he approached. There were only a few patrons in the place.

"I've been trying to get him to go

home," she said. "He cut football practice."

Chris had a few drinks in him, but he was not drunk. He said to Al, "You still following me around, kid?"

"What goes now?" Al growled.

"Craig's using Johnson at fullback," Chris told him tersely. "What in hell do you expect?"

"He didn't start Johnson yet," Al pointed out. "You'll be with the first string when we start against Eastern."

"Guess again," Chris said flatly. "Craig doesn't trust me after the Overton game. He's grooming Johnson for my job."

Al Kerrigan turned to Fredericka. He said grimly, "You hear how this thing started?"

"I know," Fredericka murmured. "He wanted to help you out. Now he's got himself in it."

"Look," Al turned to Chris. "We'll go home and start all over again, kid. We'll get ourselves straightened out."

"Do any fighting today?" Chris grinned at him. "I'm not watching any more, brother."

Al shook his head in annoyance. "That Craig will have a hell of a time trying to throw me out," he growled.

"Stay that way," Chris said. "They'll remember you after I'm gone."

On the field the following afternoon he felt the curious stares of the other Wyndham players. George Pollock drew him to one side while the backs were practicing kicking.

"What goes, Chris?" the Wyndham captain asked. "You don't act like the same guy."

"I'm all right," Chris said quietly. He saw Al Kerrigan watching them from a distance. "We'll work things out, George."

"Sure," Pollock muttered. "We're going to have a hell of a time with State this year. They want to knock our unbeaten record for a loop."

"Johnson plays a good game at full," Chris observed.

"But he's not Chris Kerrigan," Pollock stated. "Stay with us, kid."

Against Eastern, Chris went in

after eight minutes of play. Wyndham had the ball on the Eastern twenty-five, first and ten.

McAfee looked at Chris Kerrigan and said, "Yours, boy. Fourteen A."

Chris hit over right tackle. He made a half yard. There was no drive in his plunging. He tried again a few moments later and made nothing, where as Al Kerrigan and Chadwick had been picking up yardage with ease, having scored twice already.

Johnson came back into the game to finish the half, and Chris walked to the bench, head down. Thereafter he spelled Johnson, with Wyndham piling up thirty-five points against a weak Eastern outfit.

THREE FOLLOWING Saturday they knocked over a fairly tough Leeville squad by a 14 to 0 score, Al Kerrigan starring, piling up tremendous yardage on his runs. Watching him from the bench, Chris could see how much the younger brother had improved since the start of the season. Al was getting a better grip on himself; he was controlling his temper, staying out of trouble, and getting the other Wyndham men to work for him. He kept his mouth shut and he watched Chris on the bench. He stayed close to Chris off the field, where as before he'd been ducking off by himself at every opportunity.

Several times Chris complained about this, but Al shook him off doggedly.

"If you want to over to the Black Diamond, he growled, "I'll go over, too. Craig can grab both of us then."

"Stay out of trouble," Chris said. "He needs you, Al."

"He needs you, too," Al said tersely. "We got along with Johnson against Eastern and Leeville. State will be a different proposition on Saturday."

Chris let that go by. He watched young Johnson, a square-chinned sophomore, working out with the first-string backs. Johnson was big and willing, but he didn't have explosive power when he hit the line. He didn't know how to turn on the heat at exactly the right moment

to propel him through an enemy forward wall.

Big George Pollock, too, was worried, and McAfee, but Amos Craig kept his mouth shut and his opinions to himself. He worked Johnson with the regulars, putting in Chris occasionally to spell Johnson. The word swept through the school that Chris Kerrigan, mainstay of the Wyndham backfield, had lost his bearings and was finishing up his gridiron career as a second-string back.

On the campus Chris felt the curious, sympathetic stares. He knew that none of the students were aware of the real reason for his falling from grace in Amos Craig's sight.

During the days preceding the State game the excitement rose to a white-hot pitch. Several student rallies were arranged, along with a big campus meeting. "Beat State" banners were displayed in store windows in the town. State's record was one defeat and six wins, but State's six wins had come in succession after the first loss, and State wanted to spoil the perfect record Wyndham had made this season—its first in Wyndham history.

Chris Kerrigan moved through this atmosphere gravely, taking little part in it. On the field and in the dressing room he had little or no contact with Coach Amos Craig. The big man avoided him studiously.

Two days before the State game the whispering campaign started on the Wyndham campus. Al Kerrigan broke into the room early evening, his face twisted with wrath, the fire in his dark eyes.

"So it's out," he snarled. "Every man in the school knows you've been drinking, Chris, and that Craig suspects you of trying to throw the Overton game."

"Who says that?" Chris asked. He felt the sweat breaking out on his face.

"It's around," Al grated. "I don't know who started it."

"Craig didn't talk," Chris said soberly. "Somebody must have seen me at the Black Diamond."

"I'll punch in the face of any man who says you took a dime from Dar-

cy Haines," Al said quietly. "I mean that, and it includes Craig himself."

"Let me handle this," Chris told him. "It's my fight."

"You'll be out of here in the spring," Al growled. "This stink will still be around."

"We'll see," Chris said. He noticed the difference when he appeared in class next morning. Men who had known him for years looked the other way. He passed George Pollock on the campus, and the center nodded coldly to him, but kept going.

CHRIS KERRIGAN frowned. He realized that even men like Pollock, who would not believe every idle rumor going about the campus, would have to consider Amos Craig's strange behavior where Chris Kerrigan was concerned, and Chris's own peculiar lapses on the field. There was no denying that something had happened and that Craig was aware of it.

Fredericka Haines called up, the trouble in her voice. She said, "I hope you can straighten it out, Chris."

"It's too bad," Chris told her. "We hadn't figured on this."

"Darcy thinks someone at the club let the secret out," Fredericka explained. "He's very sorry."

"We took a long chance," Chris tried to laugh, "and it worked out to some extent." He wasn't smiling when he hung up the receiver. A boy brought in a note from Amos Craig. Chris was wanted down in the gym office immediately.

Craig was waiting for him, pacing up and down the room, a frown on his face.

"This is not good, Chris," he stated. "I'm afraid we'll have to come clean."

"It won't do any good," Chris said. "It's a little too late, considering the circumstances, Mr. Craig."

"What do you mean?" Craig asked, surprised. "I'll issue a statement explaining everything. I'll even tell them that the whole business was framed by Haines, myself and you in order to help Al."

"They wouldn't believe it now,"

Chris said slowly. "Everyone would think you're trying to smooth things over right before the State game so there'll be no dissension and no doubts in the minds of the players."

"But—but it's the truth," Craig muttered. "Every move you've made has been made to help Al, and you have set him on the right track. He's controlling himself on the field, and he's playing beautiful football now. I think he'll stay that way." He added quickly, "I could even get a statement from Darcy Haines to the effect that he was in on the secret, along with young Ed Johnson. Ed knows I planned to put you back into the starting line-up against State."

"The whole thing sounds too pat," Chris smiled soberly. "There'd be doubts in the minds of the players and in the minds of the Wyndham student body." He added, "And how do you think Al will feel about this when the thing is known all over the campus? He's liable to explode and quit school altogether."

"Didn't you plan on explaining to him eventually?" Craig asked, the surprise in his eyes.

Chris Kerrigan shook his head. "I thought it would be better to let the matter ride as it was. I wanted to play in the last game against State, and I thought I'd give my best in that one, and then graduate, letting Al think that he'd kept me on a straight course the last few weeks of the football season. He wouldn't—ever have to know that my getting slightly drunk, and my trouble with you, was all a plan to help him."

Amos Craig nodded gravely. "It was a nice gesture, Chris," he said quietly, "and I respect you all the more for it. I think it would have worked out all right. After the State game I could have made amends with you in Al's presence, apologizing for my suspicions. He never would have known, and no one else would have known."

"But they know now," Chris murmured, "and they won't forget."

"Unless," Craig stated slowly, "you go out against State and play a brand of football never before seen in a Wyndham-State contest. The very

fact that I start you against State will be evidence enough that I don't take stock in the rumors going around. I won't have to make any remarks at all."

"I'd appreciate that chance against State," Chris Kerrigan said. "I wouldn't care to leave Wyndham under a cloud."

THAT WAS A dark day with the threat of snow in the air. The green and white Wyndham banners whipped in the chill breeze atop the big stands. Chris Kerrigan stood on the four yard stripe, waiting for the kick-off. Brother Al was off to his right, rubbing his hands, jaws set tightly.

In the dressing room there had been little talk among the Wyndham men. Coach Amos Craig had announced his starting line-up, and Chris had seen the surprise on the faces of the men when his name had been called as starting fullback.

Craig had asked for a victory. He'd made no mention of the campus rumors concerning Chris Kerrigan, but Chris could read in the eyes of the men their interpretation of Craig's action. The Wyndham coach was putting up a bluff, trying to persuade his men that all was well in the ranks.

"You'll have to prove yourself, Chris," Craig said to him privately.

"They know that a large wad of money will be bet on this game, and that a man like Haines will be covering much of it. This is your last game, and your last chance to make a big haul for yourself if you've been playing ball with the gamblers."

"Haines will have all his money on Wyndham," Chris murmured, "but they'll never know that."

He watched the big State fullback, Sam Bower, measuring the distance to the pigskin on the ground. Bower trotted forward and swung his right foot. The ball sailed up into the gray sky and Chadwick took it on the six. The Wyndham halfback fled up the center alley, Chris and Al Kerrigan moving over in front of him.

On the twenty Chris lunged forward at the State center, a big two-hundred-and-twenty-pound-man. He

went in very hard and very low, aiming at the center's knees with his body.

The State man swerved suddenly, trying to get around Chris. His right knee came up hard against Chris Kerrigan's left cheekbone. There was an explosion in the Wyndham fullback's face. The shock of it made him sick physically. He felt the State center coming down on top of him and he tried to protect his face as much as possible.

He lay on the ground, the whole left side of his face numb. He saw Chadwick go up to the twenty-eight before he was stopped. He got up then, shaking his head dizzily, rubbing his jaw. He was positive the cheekbone had been broken or at least fractured.

In the huddle Al Kerrigan looked at him queerly, and then lifted a hand to Chris face. Chris pushed the hand away. He knew his face was swelling up badly.

"How's it, kid?" Al asked him.

"All right," Chris said. "Let's go." He hoped against hope that McAfee wouldn't ask him to carry just yet. He dreaded contact with that cheekbone. McAfee called for Al Kerrigan off left tackle. Al picked up five yards, hitting very hard through the slot.

The tough State line gave Al the works as he went through, but the halfback only smiled grimly. Chris Kerrigan felt some measure of satisfaction. He remembered then that he had to play an extraordinarily high brand of football this afternoon if he expected to wipe away the cloud over his own name, and already in the first few seconds of play he'd seriously injured himself.

McAfee went through center himself on a quarterback sneak, making two yards. He sent Chadwick around the right end for a first down to the State forty.

In the next huddle Chris Kerrigan stared at the ground grimly. He heard McAfee call his name and his number and he adjusted his helmet automatically. McAfee was calling for a straight buck over the middle. Chris took the ball, lowered his head and

ran into the line. Instinctively, he recoiled from the shock slowing down just as he reached the line. He was dragged down for no gain.

Nobody said anything in the huddle. Al Kerrigan stared at him, his eyes lifting to that swollen cheek. McAfee called his next play, Al Kerrigan on a reverse around the left side of the line.

AL SWUNG out wide with Chris and Chadwick leading him. Chris bumped into a State linebacker, and Al went down the chalk line for nine yards.

McAfee called for Chadwick, and then Al Kerrigan again, before he called up Chris's number—another buck over right guard. They were near midfield, and they needed three yards for another first down. The Wyndham sector was going wild at this quick advance down the field.

Chris took the ball from McAfee and ran forward. He gritted his teeth and plowed into the mass of struggling players, and again he slowed up. There was no explosion, no drive. He made a half yard.

State stiffened after that, making McAfee kick from the State forty-nine. The State safety ran the ball back to the thirty-two, a twisting, scintillating run.

State started to move then, its ponderous forward wall opening up huge gaps in the Wyndham line. Chris Kerrigan, backing up the line with George Pollock, dove in at the runners as they came through. He tried to favor the left side of his face, but once an elbow caught him there and he nearly fainted from the pain. Several times runners broke away from his half-hearted tackles. He glanced toward the sidelines the second time this happened, and he saw Johnson warming up. Amos Craig was watching him tensely.

When Johnson came out, Chris trotted from the field, head down. There was no noise from the stands. They watched him, and he knew they were thinking of the days when Chris Kerrigan had been the bulwark of the Wyndham backfield, when his powerful plunging had turned the tide

of battle time and time again.

He kept his face averted as he passed Craig, but the big gray-haired man called after him softly,

"We'll try it again later, Chris."

Chris sat down on the bench, pulling the sheepskin up above his neck so that the big collar nearly covered his left cheek. It was throbbing violently now, the area stabbed through with red-hot streaks of pain.

State scored on a long pass down the field, the receiver getting away from Johnson who had dropped back to cover him. State kicked a field goal early in the second quarter, making it 10 to 0, with Wyndham struggling ineffectually after the first few minutes of success.

Chris Kerrigan watched from the bench, knowing what had caused this. The Wyndham eleven had lost the momentum of its drive when it had learned that Chris Kerrigan was not trying, possibly even accepting gambler's money to ease up.

Al Kerrigan came out of the game for a breathing spell late in the second period. His face was flushed, battered from the beating the State forwards had been giving him, but he'd kept out of trouble. He dropped down next to Chris on the bench. He said grimly,

"What happened, Chris?"

"I'll get going," Chris assured him.

"I mean with that face," Al snapped. "It's blowing up like a balloon."

"A little kick," Chris said.

"It looks like a mule did the kicking," Al Kerrigan grated. "Maybe you should be off the field and having a doctor look at it."

Chris said quietly, "You know I have to play football this afternoon, kid. This is my last game for Wyndham."

Al nodded morosely. "Such damned luck I've ever seen in my life," he growled. "Don't you ever get any breaks?"

"I've had them all along," Chris said, "the good ones. I have no complaints."

Al Kerrigan lapsed into silence. They watched State drive down the field again deep into Wyndham ter-

ritory before they were stopped. When the gun went off ending the first half, it was still 10 to 0 for State. Chris walked down the field ahead of the other Wyndham men. He sat in the dressing room, his left cheek toward the wall, staring through a window.

He heard Amos Craig talking to the men, and he could feel the lack of response. There was no talk in this dressing room, no life. The veteran Wyndham squad had been hard hit by the seeming revelation and proof of Chris Kerrigan's double-dealing.

Al Kerrigan stood behind Chris while Craig spoke, and the older brother could hear him breathing heavily. He knew then that Al was getting ready to pull something, but he was hardly prepared for the following act.

IN THE brief moment of silence which followed Craig's talk, Al Kerrigan's voice sounded clearly, the anger making it tremble a little.

"You guys think Chris is stalling out there?" he asked slowly. "You think he's taking dirty money to see Wyndham lose?"

Chris felt the younger brother's hands on his shoulders then and he reached up and grasped Al's wrists, still not knowing what the halfback was going to do.

"I wonder," Al Kerrigan snapped, "how many of you tough guys would like to buck a line with a face like this." He spun Chris around then, yanking his hand away from the left side of his face so that everyone could see it. The left cheek was discolored, swollen out of proportion to the rest of the face, and even the lump seemed to be pulsating. Chris could see it in a door mirror a few yards away.

He saw the Wyndham men staring at him, and then Amos Craig came over, calling sharply for Trainer Jim Edison. "Take a look at this, Jim," he said quietly. "You should have told me, Chris."

"He wouldn't tell you if he could help it," Al scowled. "He wants to go in again and prove to these mugs that he can play a clean game for

Wyndham."

"What's been going on all along?" George Pollock asked tightly. "What in hell's happened to Chris? What about this drinking business?"

"You want to know," Al Kerrigan snapped, "and I'll give you the whole story. Chris and Mr. Craig, along with Darcy Haines, the gambler, worked out the whole business. Chris was supposed to go on a spree and get into all kinds of trouble so that I would settle down at Wyndham. He wanted to give me a sense of responsibility because I was all set to quit school and he didn't want me to go to hell."

Pollock stared at Amos Craig and then at Chris Kerrigan. Craig said quietly,

"Every word of that is true, George. Chris called me on the phone one night from Haines' Black Diamond. I was afraid to go through with it but he persuaded me it would work out. I've known all along that Haines was a rabid Wyndham rooter and would never bet against us."

Edison, the trainer, was examining Chris Kerrigan's face while Craig spoke. He turned around and said:

"Might be a fracture of the cheekbone here, Craig. I wouldn't be sure until I saw X-rays."

A bell clanged somewhere—the signal that they should be back on the field, Pollock said:

"Boys, I think we owe this half to Chris Kerrigan—a white guy."

Al Kerrigan was standing beside Chris as the Wyndham team filed out of the room. None of them were smiling, but McAfee slapped Chris's back as he went by.

"How did you find out?" Chris asked without looking up.

"I got Fredericka to spill it," Al growled. "It was damned clever, Chris. You knew I wouldn't fall for that drunk stuff, but when you admitted you had planned it and then was caught by Craig in your own trap, I was fooled."

"We need two scores out there," Chris said. "Go get them."

HE SAT on the bench as Wyndham kicked off to start the second half. He watched the big State team take the ball and buck into a stone wall. Pollock and Chadwick roamed behind the Wyndham line, charging in every time a State runner approached. The Wyndham forwards broke through time and time again to smear State runners before they got started.

McAfee took the State kick on his own thirty-five, and raced eighteen yards into State territory. Al Kerrigan plowed over tackle for nine. Chadwick hit around the right end for seven, and then Chadwick took a short flat pass from McAfee and ran to the State nine-yard stripe.

Chris Kerrigan, standing with Craig out on the sidelines, listened to the roar behind him. McAfee sent Johnson into the line, and the kid fullback hammered through for five yards. It was Johnson again, driving over right guard, to the one, and then Al Kerrigan hurtling his long body over the middle of the line for the score.

"They'll never stop those boys now," Craig said proudly.

State received another kick-off, a trifle stunned at the fury of the new Wyndham attack. State fumbled on the first play, and Pollock was on top of the ball like a big cat, scooping it up to his chest as he went through the air. It was first and ten on the State nineteen.

McAfee sent Johnson into the line and the kid hit at exactly the right moment, exploding over left guard, going through for eight.

"Watch him next year," Chris said. "He's a good boy, Mr. Craig."

McAfee sent Al Kerrigan around the right end on a double reverse, and Al picked up six to the five. They hammered the middle then four successive times, Chadwick and Johnson carrying, and it was Chadwick who went over from the half yard marker. McAfee kicked the point, making it 14 to 10 for Wyndham in the first period.

"That's all we'll need," Craig

grinned. "Now we hold them."

State reached their own thirty-two and were forced to kick. A beautiful punt put the ball out of bounds on the Wyndham seven. The State defense found itself again, and Wyndham had tougher going the remainder of the quarter.

Starting their fourth period it was still 14 to 10 for Wyndham, with both teams battling around midfield, never crossing into the other's territory. State had plenty of reserve strength, and the State coach was throwing second and third lines into the fray to batter the Wyndham forwards.

State reached the Wyndham eighteen and lost the ball on downs. They advanced again to the ten, but the valiant Wyndham line held grim death. Chris Kerrigan watched Amos Craig sweating it out on the sidelines.

Cagily, McAfee played it safe, holding the ball as long as possible, taking his time on every play, using up those precious seconds. There were eight minutes remaining in the game when Johnson hit the center of the line from his own fourteen-yard line.

The sophomore banged in very hard, head low, finding his hole. He was smothered by State linemen. Chris watched the way he went down and he knew that the boy was hurt.

A knee had caught Johnson in under the chin and his head sagged as he plunged forward. The ball spurted out of his limp hands, falling into the willing arms of Chuck Howlett, the speedy State quarterback.

Howlett made a quick reverse, heading for the right side of the line. Blockers sprang up from all angles forming a phalanx in front of him. They went down the sidelines with the Wyndham rooters screaming in anguish.

George Pollock hurtled that moving body of men, reaching for the runner. The Wyndham captain's big hands grazed Howlett's red jersey and slipped off. Al Kerrigan plunged like a madman, but he went through the blockers just as Howlett moved out farther toward the line. Al's tackle missed Howlett's ankles by

inches. He lay on the ground pounding the grass furiously.

McAfee, the safety, made the last bid at the flying State runner. McAfee, the lightest man on the squad, took his chance on a flying dive over one of the State blockers. He went up very high, got both arms around Howlett's neck and then slipped off. Howlett staggered over the goal line from the five.

CHRIS KERRIGAN was up on his feet along with the other Wyndham men. He heard the delirious screeches of the State supporters; he saw the red pennants fluttering across the field. White-clad cheerleaders were bouncing up and down trying to organize a cheer, but no one paid any attention to them.

Johnson was being carried from the field, head sagging. It was 17 to 14 for State. Chris slipped out of the sheepskin coat and walked out to where Craig was examining the injured Johnson. The sophomore had been knocked unconscious by the kick and he was through for the afternoon.

Chris picked up a helmet. He said quietly:

"I'm going in, Mr. Craig."

Craig spun around, jaw drooping. He started to speak, but Chris only smiled at him, and trotted across the field. There was no noise from the Wyndham sector as they watched him, the big No. 12 clearly discernible on his green jersey.

Al Kerrigan started toward him, waving his hands frantically, but Chris reported to the referee and then trotted toward the Wyndham players.

George Pollock said, "Look, kid, you're in no condition to play football."

"It's only my jaw and my cheek,"

Chris grinned crookedly. "My legs are as good as ever. I haven't played any football today as yet."

In the huddle he said to McAfee, "Call me, kid, and call me often."

McAfee looked at him and then at Al Kerrigan. He called Chris's number. They were on the twenty, first and ten. Chris Kerrigan took the ball from McAfee, moving on the dead

run. The Wyndham line gave him a hole, not very wide. His big shoulders hit the hold, widening it so that the rest of his body could get through. He ran for five yards, and they hit him down hard.

He got it again, a spinner off right tackle. He let himself go this time, ingoring the swollen face. The Wyndham line gave him more room, fighting like devils to do it. He spun away from one man, side-stepped another, and kept going, head down, shoulders tight, the ball gripped under his right arm.

Two States men hit him and he carried them forward, legs churning the turf like a bull. He made fourteen yards on the play, and somebody in the Wyndham section cheered.

McAfee called No. 16-F this time, a trick play with Chris feinting at the left tackle spot and then swinging out wide. For a big man he was plenty fast on his feet and could round the ends when the occasion required it.

The play started as a regulation off-tackle slant, Chris taking the ball on a short lateral from McAfee. He cut for the tackle slot, feinting beautifully, drawing in the State linebackers. He swung out wide then, picking up Al Kerrigan crossing in front of him.

They sprinted for the sidelines, and Al knocked down the State end, hitting him with the force of a ton of bricks. Chris kept going, picking up more speed with each step. He outran the State quarterback for the sideline and went down the stripe, over the fifty, past the State, forty-five, the forty, the thirty-five. He swung in here toward midfield as a State tackler made a dive for his heels.

IT WAS first and ten on the four yard marker with only a few minutes left on the big clock. The Wyndham team helped him to his feet. Al looked at him anxiously.

"We'll take it over," Chris panted. He heard cheers then, and he heard his own name. It sounded good.

McAfee sent Chadwick into the line and Chadwick was stopped with no

gain. The State forwards were tightening, ready for this last ditch stand. McAfee glanced at Chris Kerrigan and Chris winked at him, face drawn, swollen out of shape.

He went over guard—a straight buck. He made two yards, five State men on top of him when the referee's whistle blew. McAfee hesitated.

"My ball," Chris Kerrigan told him. "Give me a hole, boys."

Chris went through standing up, driving directly between the goal posts, through the end zone, not a State man laying a hand on him. The green Wyndham line moved forward as one man, the three backfield men going with them, striking the State team with cyclonic force, clearing a path—ten feet wide, a half mile deep!

Fredericka Haines was waiting on the walk near the dormitory when the two Kerrigans came up. Her hair was wind-blown, and her cheeks flushed from the excitement. On the Wyndham campus excited men were still rushing around, grabbing each other, shaking hands, listening to the incredible story of Chris and Al Kerrigan.

"They'll be remembering you a long time after you're gone from here," Fredericka told the older brother.

Chris face was bandaged, the X-Rays having discovered a slight fracture of the cheekbone. He tried to smile, but the effort hurt him. He shook hands gravely with Fredericka because that was what everybody was doing.

Al Kerrigan grinned, "I'll let you two young people alone. I have some important business to attend to."

"Like what?" Chris asked him.

"Like making this school forget that I was a cheap kind of rat when I came here," Al said quietly. "How's that sound, kid?"

"To me," Chris told him, "it sounds good." He looked at brother Al and he saw a different boy. He had no worries concerning Al now. On the field of battle Al Kerrigan had found and proven himself. He said, "Okay, kid," and he felt a hand in his own, a cool hand, and it felt good. He said, "Okay," again and he meant it.

ACE NOVELET OF A GASHOUSE GANG WHO TURNED INTO HOOP KINGS!

HANG TOUGH, HOOPSTER

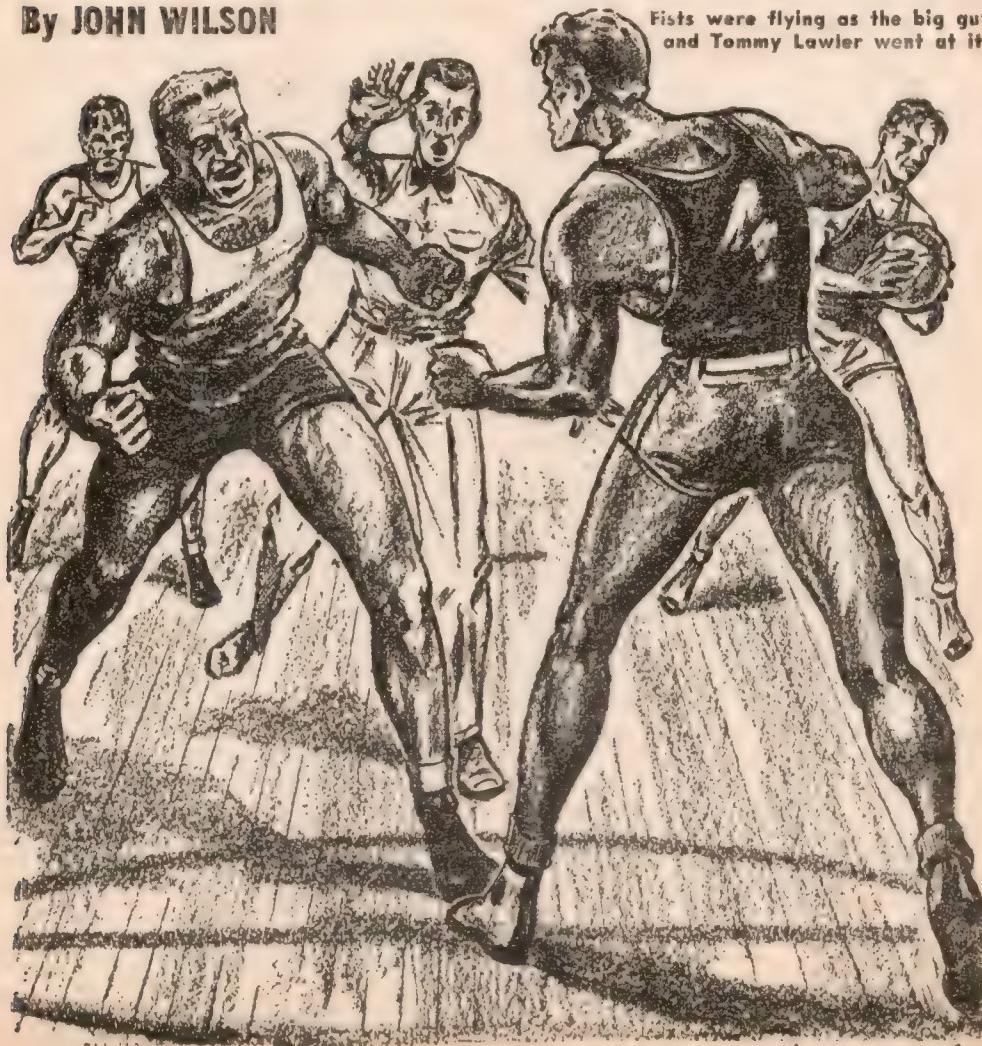
THE SCENE resembled a Pier 9 brawl more than a basketball scrimmage. Elbows were flying and knees used freely in pursuit of the skittering leather that no one individual seemed able to pin down. Restraint was something to which cavorting hoopsters gave no heed. Science was running a bad last.

This gang from the Roundhouse knew more about breaking skulls than shooting baskets, but they were out to lick the world—five men at a time on a basketball court!



By JOHN WILSON

Fists were flying as the big guy and Tommy Lawler went at it!



The clatter of the pounding feet and the clop of the leather shook the town's Civic Center to its confines. It was not much of a basketball court, the Civic Center. The floor boards were splintered and decayed. The windows were broken, and the wind howled through the gaps. But the would-be courters didn't seem to mind. Nothing seemed to matter except hammering the leather through the iron-ring. Insofar as free basketball facilities went, the Civic Center was the best that could be offered them.

The husky black-haired youth tore away from the web of players winning undisputed possession of the melon. He began dribbling down court, laughing and challenging the others to take the ball away from him. The little guy, wide and tow-headed, and the nearest to the ball-toter, took up the bid. He leaped in, feinting in one direction and coming off the other end, and grabbed the leather. It would be ordinarily a held ball. The ref's whistle shrilled but got no response. The mauling and wrestling went on, the pair toppling to the floor and continuing to scrap.

Lanny Warren, standing at the entrance to the court, shook his head, bewildered at the scene unfolding. He was a tall and wiry, and surprisingly big across the shoulders. It was his first encounter with the hoopsters who frequented the Civic Center. He turned to the dark, thick-set man alongside him, Ben Driggs, who gave what supervision he could to the Civic Center.

"Ben, these kids play a nice game of indoor football. Who are they?" His glance strayed again to the players, their shabby togs, their grim, taut faces. "I guess they wouldn't be here if they didn't have some interest in the game. But the conditions are almost too much of a handicap to overcome."

"They're called the Roundhouse gang," Ben said. "They come from the outskirts of the town that lies along the river. It's a rough, tough section, Lanny."

There was another long-winded mix-up, and a big blond guy pulled

into the clear. He dribbled down the court, till he got within set-shot range. There he stopped, crouched, and started to let the leather fly. The little guy, Tommy Lawler, seemed to come out of nowhere, leaping and batting the melon loose as it started toward the goal. It squirted at a tangent, and Lawler was on it, pouncing.

He whirled across the boards, dribbling and finally passing to a teammate just as the big guy came upon him. The latter stuck out a foot, but Tommy, seeming to sense the move, jumped aside. He grinned, pleased at having foiled the awkward attempt to trip him. The big guy got sore and began handling the situation with his fists.

In the twinkling of an eye, fists were flying, as the big guy and Tommy Lawler went at it. Lanny Warren started out there to stop the fracas, but Ben Driggs laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"It's no use, Lanny," Ben said hopelessly. "Reforming them won't work. I had ideas about that when I came here. I discovered it just can't be done."

"The big guy is too big and will wallop Lawler something awful," Lanny protested.

BEN DRIGGS laughed. "Don't let the size of 'em fool you. The big guy has tried that before. Tommy Lawler knows how to take care of himself. This storm will blow over in a minute, and they'll be the good friends they really are." There was a brief silence before Driggs resumed, his voice thoughtful. "Lawler might turn out to be somebody, if he weren't one of the Roundhouse gang. Very few of them grow up to be worth a darn."

"What's that got to do with it?" Lanny Warren asked. "No matter who one is or where one comes from, a guy with the real makings . . ." He stopped short, and seemed a little embarrassed.

"I'm quoting from the record," said Ben Driggs. "And you don't know this gang like I do."

Lanny said suddenly: "Well, here's

giving it a whirl. Have you got a whistle, Ben?"

"You've got my blessings," Ben said, handing him the whistle.

Lanny ducked into the office and hung his coat on a chair. Then he stepped out back onto the court. He stuck the whistle between his lips, blew a tentative blast. He might have been selling peanuts a thousand miles away for all the attention it got him. He tried it again, and this time a couple of Roundhouse lads heard it, and turned to see who was responsible. They eyed him curiously, and momentarily play stopped as the others took the cue from those who had first spotted him. Their eyes ran over his perfectly tailored clothes.

Play had halted completely. The big guy edged close to Lanny, said jeeringly, "Looka this one, guys. Like something out of the movies. Bet he's one of the gang that owns the mines." He approached Lanny, jaw jutted. "We don't know who you are," he said, "But we can get along without you fine. Beat it. Scram."

The others crowded around, forming a threatening circle. Their eyes were hard, hostile. Tommy Lawler clutched the basketball, and when Lanny spoke, he addressed him.

"Fella," Lanny said, the trace of a smile lurking about the corners of his mouth, "Would you mind letting me have that ball?"

"Mister, there's only one way you can get this ball. That's by coming over here and taking it."

Lanny Warren said softly, "I'd rather have you hand it to me."

Underneath the silky bland tones was steel. A tense few seconds followed, while the Roundhouse gang exchanged inquiring glances. It was obvious that they were trying to decide how to handle the guy, looking him over from head to foot, noticing the square shoulders, the slim waist. Wondering whether they ought to beat up the guy who'd been brash enough to interrupt their practice session.

Suddenly Tommy Lawler inched forward a couple of steps, holding the leather teasingly in front of Lanny.

A second later as though the act had been rehearsed, the big blonde guy cut in. "We don't like meddlers around here." He strode forward, fists clenched, a formidable figure. He wound up and threw a sweeping Roundhouse right. Lanny Warren swiftly stepped aside, dodging the clumsy blow. His own fist shot straight and short, whizzing alongside the big guy's jaw. The big guy sat down hard and abruptly, amazement covering his face. The others gaped, awed by the force and accuracy of the punch, the unhurried coolness of the man. The big guy rubbed his hand across his jaw and stared up at Lanny.

"That's something I'm sorry I had to do," Lanny said. "You asked for it, though. Now listen to what I have to say. If you guys want to learn to play this game right, I'll be willing to do the teaching. When you're ready, come looking for me and I'll be here."

THAT BROKE up the practice session. As though by common, unspoken understanding they walked off the court, through the exit on the far side of the office. Sullen, glowering faces told Lanny that they wouldn't forget easily.

Tommy Lawler brought up the rear. He flipped a glance over his shoulder, grinning and seemingly delighted at the one-punch drubbing handed the big guy.

Ben Driggs led Lanny into the cubicle to the right of the court entrance that was his office.

"That punch was a language they understand—and maybe respect," Ben said, waving Lanny to a chair. "But if I recall, you always were a rather persuasive gent. Seems I remember how you got Prexy to give one of your players another chance after he'd flunked a couple of exams. It took a lot of talking."

"You should know about me after being my roommate at Western for four years," Lanny replied.

"Pretty proud about it, too," Ben said. "Especially when you became coach and started turning out those

superduper basketball teams. Fifteen years you're coach, and suddenly you quit. How come, Lanny?"

Lanny shugged. He suddenly looked old and tired. "That story about me resigning was a whitewash job. I didn't quit, Ben. They fired me, though I'd have given almost anything to have stayed on." He paused, taking a breath, and shook his head. "A new administration came in, changing everything, and making a lot of noise. Just sorta so you'd know they were there, I guess. I got caught in the tide."

Ben Driggs listened, and disbelief spread over his face.

"But," he protested, "Surely you must have had other offers. Big time stuff. You've got a rep as one of the best in the country."

"Plenty of offers," Lanny said. "But I turned them down. Didn't even consider them. Not after the deal at Western. The old spirit is gone. I'm through with that, Ben. All washed up."

For a moment they were both silent. Ben understood and sensed the other's gratitude for understanding. Then Ben said:

"I've been trying to get a real team going around here. Not much luck though. Maybe you'd be able to make a go of it. That Roundhouse gang are a tough bunch of cookies, and whipping them into a team could be the toughest assignment you ever faced. But after the way you showed them who's boss tonight, I think you can do it."

Steel was Worthington's major business, with the inevitable coal-mining and railroading not far behind. There was a local basketball loop in the city. Most of the players were former college aces, holding down good jobs at the mills and mines. They played and practiced at a spacious modern gymnasium reserved for their exclusive use.

The next afternoon found Lanny Warren at the Worthington Civic Center. He glanced anxiously at his watch from time to time, wondering if the Roundhouse gang would show up. It was getting late, and Lanny was

no longer expecting them when the door opened and Tommy Lawler slipped in. Tailing close behind was another ragged figure.

"Glad to see you, Tommy," Lanny said. "And your pal, too."

Casually Tommy inspected his finger nails. "Things were kinda dull. Didn't have anything special to do. Thought I'd drop by and see what was cooking."

Lanny dug a shiny new basketball out of the gear locker in the office. He shuffled out onto the court. He was near the center of the court when he uncorked his first shot. It arched beautifully and split the cords without touching the backboard. He put on an exhibition of set shooting that was startling in its accuracy. Tommy Lawler's eyes bulged, and the other boy stood and watched with his mouth wide open. They'd never seen such dazzling precision coupled with smooth, flawless form. Lanny pretended to be unaware of their presence, but he kept a close watch on them out of the corner of his eye. He poured the leather through the hoop from all angles.

FINALLY Tommy Lawler couldn't resist blurting out, "Gimme that ball and let me take a crack at it."

Lanny grinned and spun the melon to Tommy. That was the beginning, and the session lasted three hours. Tommy owned quick hands and a sharp eye. He was eager to learn, and so was the other Roundhouse kid, Skippy Lane. They absorbed the fundamental instruction on ball handling and marksmanship that Lanny concentrated on. Even after three hours, they were reluctant to break away, and Lanny knew he'd taken the first hurdle. They'd be back.

Next afternoon they were waiting outside the Center when Lanny arrived. There were a half dozen candidates. Lanny Warren seemed years younger, the lines of strain not so deep, as he plunged into the task of teaching the willing kids the game he loved. Somehow it made him for-

get how bitterly he'd been hurt by Western's shabby treatment.

Ben Driggs was frankly amazed. He looked upon it as almost a miracle that Lanny had been able to get them to turn out for practice. And seeing how whole-heartedly they poured themselves into it made him blink. On the third day a whole slew appeared, more than enough for two full teams. There was a scrimmage, followed by long hours of basic teaching.

With each practice session the squad swelled, and gradually Lanny's coaching efforts began to show tangible results. The boys were shooting better, learning teamwork, forgetting the roughhouse stuff. They did what Lanny told them to and never questioned his orders. The first team began to shape up, and it became more and more plain that little Tommy Lawler was the sparkplug of the outfit.

Meeting the expense out of his own pocket, Lanny Warren ordered enough equipment from a sporting goods company to outfit every man on the squad. A few days later the stuff was ready for distribution to the Roundhouse gang when they arrived for their work-out. The trunks were of red silk, with red and white jerseys completing the uniform. There were sneakers for all.

The Roundhouse gang was stunned into silence. Being treated well was something new to them. They stood around sheepishly for a moment, then Lanny said:

"Well, fellas, don't just stand there looking. Climb into those things. We gotta team, and there's plenty of work ahead. Hard work. So let's get going."

There was a mumbled chorus of thanks, and then Tommy Lawler said, "What about a name for the team?"

"How about the Roundhousers?" someone suggested.

Lanny Warren said, "Sounds okay to me."

Agreement was general, and the session got started.

Finding games for the team, Lanny soon discovered, was a much more difficult problem than finding a name. Lanny approached the Industrial League, as the local loop called

itself, and the smug officials treated it as a huge joke. They not only turned him down cold, but they came close to laughing in his face.

Holding down the important post of president of the Valley League, was Les Dulles. He was the son of P. T. Dulles, owner of the Acme Steel works, the Acme Coal Mine, and various other flourishing enterprises. P. T. was undoubtedly the most influential man in Worthington.

Les Dulles was the chief belittler of the Roundhousers, and after the written application was turned down, Lanny Warren went to see him.

"I've read the rules carefully," he stated, "and I can't see why we should be refused."

"The whole proposal is preposterous," Les Dulles shrugged. "It simply doesn't make sense."

"What do you intend to do?"

"I'll call a special meeting of the board. We'll let you know the decision."

LANNY WARREN expected them to vote as they did. It was a blow to his plans, but no disappointment, that the board voted unanimously against the inclusion of the Roundhousers in the League.

The toughest part of it was breaking the news to the kids. They were all wrapped up in their team, and their faces fell when he related how they'd been turned down cold.

"It might be a blessing in disguise," Lanny said. "There are some pretty slick players operating for these League teams. Guys who have proved themselves in the stiffest competition. You guys still have a lot to learn. It might be a good idea to get some seasoning under your belts before tackling anything as tough as the League. I've been sending out some feelers. We'll have plenty of games lined up before long."

Some of the gloom lifted, and Lanny went on: "Don't forget that big tourney they stage at the end of the season. If we pile up a good enough record they won't be able to keep us out. I think you fellows have the stuff to do it. It'll give us something to shoot for."

Smartly attired in their red silk shorts, the Roundhousers made their bow as an organized team a few days later. The opposition was the Arrows, an outfit from a neighboring coal-mining town. The Roundhousers made the trip by bus.

At the forward slots for the Roundhousers were Tommy Lawler and Pug Lenahan. Duke Gallegher and Skippy Lane were the guards, and at center was Stew Murphy.

There was quite a crowd on hand for the opening game of the season. And the crowd got a big belt out of the proceedings. Both teams made plenty of mistakes. The Roundhousers were far from polished, finished performers. Some of their lapses were ludicrous, and at times in the heat of battle all their coaching slipped away from them. They forgot that basketball is a game of science having no connection with the pugilistic art. But more than once they clicked brilliantly on one of the series of set plays Lanny Warren had taught them. And it was these flashes of precise execution that were the pay-off as far as the coach was concerned.

As the minutes ticked by, the tilt developed into a close, seesaw battle, with the caliber of play steadily improving. With five minutes remaining the Roundhousers held a scant 33-30 lead.

The Roundhousers took possession at midcourt on an out-of-bounds play. Duke Gallegher faked a pass to Pug Lenahan, then rifled the ball to Tommy Lawler scooting down the sideline. Tommy whipped it to Stew Murphy, broke for the basket, like something driven by atomic power. Stew fed the return pass chest high to Tommy. Tommy dribbled in on the hoop, rang up a neat hook shot for two points.

That was the signal for the Roundhousers to pull away. For the remaining time they were a hard-driving, deft-passing gang. The final score was 43-33. It was a triumphant return, with everyone on the bus full of high spirits.

The Roundhousers soon became accustomed to travelling by bus. All

their games were played on their opponents' homecourts. And all were out-of-town. None of the Worthington aggregations wanted any part of them.

That didn't faze the Roundhousers one bit. They concentrated on the task of piling up the victories, grimly determined to win entry to the post season tournament. Their improvement was astonishing. Each game they were a little surer, a little slicker. And it showed in the final scores. They racked up eleven straight games, with the winning margins getting wider all the time.

It was the eleventh game, a 67-23 rout, that made the Worthington fans sit up and take notice. The Worthington fans were a rabid lot, and word of the Roundhousers' prowess began to spread around.

LES DULLES' Acme Steel team breezed home in the town Industrial League. Their star-studded line-up glittered with the names of former college aces. It was whispered that some of them were imported and employed by Acme Steel for the express purpose of bolstering the squad. No one dared say anything openly. Although it had happened that several ex-collegians found themselves out of a job when their play slipped badly.

Now the basketball season was approaching its climax, the annual tournament. The top teams of the leagues of adjacent towns and counties competed, together with independent aggregations that had compiled outstanding records. Generally at least a dozen teams fought it out in the elimination series. Acme Steel had a strangle-hold on the championship. With Les Dulles their star and key man, they'd won it four consecutive years.

The Worthington fans had little love for Les Dulles. Acme Steel always played to a full house, but the great majority came hoping to see them get trounced. Les Dulles' high-handed manner and questionable tactics just didn't appeal to them. The fans were almost invariably disappointed. Dulles was a ball player, and

his supporting cast was every bit as good.

Lanny Warren submitted an entry blank for the Roundhousers. The next day he received a note in reply. It read: "We are unable to accept the Roundhousers because they have not compiled a sufficiently outstanding record."

Lanny Warren couldn't help but wonder at this. What, he asked, did constitute a sufficiently good record? Winning every game, and most of them by lopsided scores, seemed ample to Lanny. The answer was simple, though. The same stumbling block lay in the path of the Roundhousers, in the person of Les Dulles. A little inquiry revealed that once again, as chairman of the board, he had queered things.

Lanny Warren wasn't going to take this one as easily as he had the earlier rebuff. He hotfooted it down to Les Dulles' office, and asked for further explanation on the thumbs-down decision.

From behind the heavy, solid, modernistic desk, Les Dulles smirked, "It's too bad, Warren. But we can't permit the Roundhousers to enter. Who'd they beat? A lot of third-rate outfits. Wins like that carry no weight. Let 'em go out and beat somebody big, and maybe next year we'll consider them. But not this year."

Lanny Warren lost his patience. He exploded, "You're giving us a rotten brush-off, Dulles. I think you're afraid that the Roundhousers might take you and that bunch of pros you have working for you."

Les Dulles snickered, and then a brittle ugly laugh spilled across his lips. "You've got your nerve coming in here and talking to me like this. If I didn't think you were all upset, I wouldn't stand for it. However, the remarks you made about my players will take quite some proving, so kindly keep them to yourself."

IT WASN'T that simple, though, for Les Dulles to brush the Roundhousers aside. The fans raised awful holler, and finally Les Dulles was driven to make some kind of con-

cession. He concocted what at first appeared to be a fair, honest plan. But those in the know were quick to observe the joker in it.

Les Dulles said, "We'll give the Roundhousers a chance to prove that they rate a starting berth in the tourney. They can meet the Freeburg Falcons in a special match. If they defeat the Falcons, we'll allow them to play in the tourney."

Les Dulles grinned as he made this proposition. He felt he was pulling off a masterful stroke. The Freeburg Falcons were one of the classiest teams in the vicinity. They'd run a close second to the Acme Steel crew during the course of the Valley League season, and in the decisive game against that collection of rangers, had lost by only a few points, their powerful last-half rally barely missing nipping the Acmes. Moreover, they were as tough physically as they were on the basketball court. More than one of their games had degenerated into brawls.

To Lanny Warren this seemed to be the equivalent of roasting snowballs in an oven till they turned a golden brown. Les Dulles was handing them a loaded shotgun and telling them he didn't care in what direction they pointed it so long as they shot themselves full of holes. But Lanny could see no way out. If they turned the match down it would be attributed to lack of guts. And there was a large element among the fans who reasoned that if the Roundhousers were as good as they thought they were, they wouldn't be afraid to tackle any opposition.

Lanny Warren accepted the offer, and arrangements were made to play the game on the Acme Steel court. It was the first time they were appearing in their own home town. But when they requested permission to work out on the court and familiarize themselves with it, the request was denied by Les Dulles. The Freeburg Falcons had showed there several times and were well acquainted with its ins and outs. But Lanny and the Roundhousers made the best of it, working diligently for the biggest

game they'd played so far.

There was plenty of interest in Worthington over the match. The fans were anxious to see the Roundhousers in action. They knew, from Lanny Warren's magic reputation, that any outfit he floored would be well-coached and well-conditioned, the style of basketball he featured depending on speed and precision. Game night it looked as if at least half the population of the city was jammed into the Acme gym.

NON THE dressing room before the games, Ben Driggs cornered Lanny Warren and spoke to him. He'd been waiting for an opportunity to get what he had to say off his chest.

"When is all this going to end, Lanny?" he said, speaking low and earnestly. "This is no town for a man of your talent. You're wasting your time here. You've got a lot of big things left in your system. Your boys are willing and they've come a long way under your tutelage, but they don't have a chance. The cards are stacked against them. Dulles runs things around here, and he runs them any damned way he sees fit. One way or another, he'll make sure you're on the short end. Let this game wind it up. As soon as it's over pack your stuff and grab the first train out: Hook up with a big time outfit where you belong. Before it's too late."

An odd light flared to Lanny Warren's eyes. "I'll agree with you that the cards are stacked against these kids. But I'm afraid I'll be sticking around awhile. I'm not running out on them, whether they win or lose."

From the seats overlooking the gym the crowd shouted impatiently for the Roundhousers to show themselves. When togged in scarlet they trotted out onto the court, the roar that greeted them almost tore the roof off the place. There were plenty of cheers, but there were also razzberries and raucous cries hurled down on them. Somehow it came as a surprise, a bunch of dead-enders like the Roundhousers decked out in silk uniforms.

"Who are the girl reserves playing

tonight?" someone shouted.

"My, aren't they pretty!" a bass voice jeered.

And another: "When's the dance begin?"

Some of the Roundhouse gang began to get hot under the collar under this verbal treatment.

"Next guy I hear making a crack, I'll go over and clout him a couple," said Duke Gallegher.

"Take it easy," Lanny said. "Can't you see what it is? Dulles has a clique planted here. They'll Barber you clean out of the arena if you let them. Don't give it a thought. I have an idea most of the fans came here to root for us."

Lanny took one look at the team they were to face and he frowned. Trouble loomed ahead. The only thing they'd brought along from Freeburg was the name. At least three strange birds were roosting with the Falcons—crackerjack basketeers who had done all their regular playing with other League clubs. The handwriting was clear. The Freeburg line-up was loaded. Les Dulles wasn't taking any chances on the Roundhousers winning this one.

As added insurance the referee chosen to officiate happened to be one of the minor officials of Acme Steel. Lanny knew he was wasting his breath protesting to the guy, but he did it anyhow. He said:

"How come Freeburg isn't playing their regular team?"

The referee smiled crookedly. "A couple guys got took sick suddenly. Luckily they were able to get some players from the Stratton team to fill in."

"Let me know what hospital they're in and I'll send them flowers," Lanny said angrily. He'd glanced to the spot behind the Freeburg bench where Les Dulles was sitting. Evidently Dulles had heard the exchange because he was grinning like a cat with a gutful of salmon.

THREE TEAMS lined up for the opening tap, and the referee couldn't have done a better job of making sure that Freeburg got pos-

session if he'd handed the ball to them. The Freeburg pivot man slapped the ball to a forward lunging in. The forward dribbled a few steps, shoveled a short pass to the guard coming up behind him.

The forward scooted down the sideline, with Duke Gallegher after him like a bloodhound. The ball passed from hand to hand around center court, setting things up for a sharp pass to the fleet forward.

Suddenly traffic jammed. In the melee, someone's foot nearly tripped up Duke. He went sprawling to the floor. The Freeburg forward was in the clear. He crouched, took deliberate aim, cut loose with his heave. The basketball rattled off the backboard, swished cleanly through the cords. Freeburg had quickly jumped into the lead, 2-0.

Quickly the Roundhousers moved to the attack. They moved swiftly, running hard. Pug Lenahan bulleted a pass to Stew Murphy. Stew winged it to Tommy Lawler, knifing in on the basket from an angle. But before Tommy could get his shot off, a burly Falcon catapulted into him from behind. Tommy took off like he had wings, tumbled heavily into the seats that had been set up at the end of the court. He tried to extricate himself from the tangle. Hands held him, tugged at him, pushed him off balance. It looked like an elaborate plot. Tommy knew that his being shoved into the bleachers was no accident. There were a flock of stooges planted there to manhandle any Roundhousers falling into the trap. It was quite a set-up Les Dulles arranged.

By the time Tommy managed to tear himself loose, the Freeburg offensive was roaring up the court. The ball flitted from one man to another with almost mathematical precision. The Roundhousers were caught short by the suddenness with which the direction of attack shifted. And for many seconds they were as good as playing with four men. Dumpy Meredith, one of the Stratton slickers subbing for the "sick" Falcons, climaxed the attack by taking a short pass and pouring a one-hander through the hoop.

Pug Lenahan took the ball out, aiming a pass at Tommy Lawler. Once again they roughed Tommy up, one man shouldering him out of the play while another snatched the ball that bounded off Tommy's chest. It was undoubtedly a foul, but the ref happened to be looking the other way.

Roundhouser Skippy Lane barged in on the Freeburg man before he could get the ball away. There was a brief tussle, then the ball was rolling free. A fierce scramble for possession followed. But it was Tommy Lawler burning inside and out with anger, who slithered into the mix-up and emerged with the ball. He was smiling with savage triumph as he started dribbling. The shrill of the whistle cut him short, and the referee pointed at Tommy, saying:

"Foul on number three. Hacking."

The Freeburg sharpshooter dunked it. The Roundhousers were furious. They fought like tigers. But it was no use. If they so much as touched a Freeburg player, the ref called a foul on them. Six were called in quick succession. The Falcons converted five of them and went ahead, 10-0. The game looked like a runaway.

Confused and a little down-hearted, the Roundhousers glanced toward Lanny Warren. The coach sat impassively on the bench. His face was a total blank and he didn't signal to them in any way. There was nothing he could do for them now. He'd taught them the game, but once they were on the floor they were strictly on their own. It was their fight, and theirs alone.

The Roundhousers called a time out. When play resumed and they took the ball out, they seemed to have regained some of their badly shaken poise. Duke Gallegher and Skippy Lane shuttled the ball back and forth across the boards. It was a slow, deliberate style of ball. A spectator yelled down:

"You can play catch tomorrow. How about some basketball tonight."

The Roundhousers paid him no heed. They took their own sweet time. They were beginning to handle the

melon with that silken smoothness that was the trade mark of a Lanny Warren coached team. The ball whipped around like a marble in a pin-ball machine. Stew Murphy grabbed a pass, and out of nowhere a slew of Falcons swarmed at him. Quick as a cat he raised the melon over his head. Tommy Lawler had scampered into an unguarded corner. He looked lonesome there, and Stew's arms shot forward, snapping the ball off to Tommy for company. Just as he did so, two Freeburg players slammed into him. Stew sat down hard, so hard there was a gasp from the fans, thinking he'd been hurt. But Stew was made of spring-steel and rubber and bounced right back up.

MEANWHILE Tommy Lawler had taken cool aim and lofted a set shot from the corner. It rimmed the basket, and plopped through. The Roundhousers had broken the ice, but they were still trailing badly, 10-2.

The bruising Falcons unleashed a furious attack. Crandall, their pivot man, got away with everything up to and just short of mayhem, caging one out of the bucket. He gave Stew Murphy the hip, pushed him, and finally charged through Stew. The ref's whistle was strangely silent while these infractions were being committed. They were so flagrant that it was plain to everyone in the place that the Roundhousers were the hapless victims of a neat and complete swindle. The Roundhousers could hardly take a deep breath without a foul being called. On the other hand, the Freeburg players were using everything but brass knuckles, and getting away with it. Jeers ripped from the crowd.

Steadily the Falcons drew away. At the end of the first period they had rolled up a comfortable 17-6 lead.

The Roundhousers charged down the hardwood, weaving a magical, dazzling pattern of attack. Pug Lenahan dribbled under the outstretched arms of the lanky Freeburg center. He faked to his right, cut sharply to the left, hooked in a beautiful lay-up shot. The Roundhousers were red-

hot. The Falcons sank a foul, then Skippy Lane shook loose on a fast break and had plenty of time, and made his try good. The surge of the Roundhousers had sliced the lead almost in half. With the scoreboard reading 20-14, the Roundhousers were back in the game.

But the referee came to the Falcons' aid again. Using roughhouse tactics, the Falcons rallied. Dumpy Meredith hit the cords from up close. Then Crandall dunked one from the bucket. Three fouls on invisible Roundhouser violations resulted in three more points. In the face of the Falcon hold 'em and sock 'em tactics the Roundhousers were handcuffed. At half time the Falcons led, 27-14. It looked hopeless.

Between halves, Lanny Warren's eyes ran over the bunch of weary, grim-faced youngsters. They'd played their hearts out, never given up, taken the rawest decisions in stride.

"I'm proud of you fellows," he addressed them. "You're a team and a mighty good one. Give it everything you've got, like you did in the first half, and I'll be satisfied."

None of the Roundhousers said anything right away. They didn't have to. The way their eyes shone, and their lips tightened with grim resolve brought a lump to Lanny's throat.

"Don't you worry, mister," Tommy Lawler finally said, "we won't let you down."

STARTING THE second half, the Falcons corralled the tap. But Duke Gallagher stole a pass and the Roundhousers went slamming down the court. Every pass was perfect and the leather was in constant motion. Nothing could pry them loose from the melon. They were meshing perfectly as the wheels and gears of a fine watch. Tommy Lawler slipped away from his guard, snatched a pass that came at him like something shot out of a gun. He dribbled, and a Falcon was on him, intent on breaking up the play somehow. He aimed an elbow at Tommy's jaw. But nothing was stopping Tommy this trip. He never broke stride as he swayed out

of reach of the vicious elbow thrust. The pivot. The shot. A looping one-hander that swished through. The crowd howled for both the shot and Tommy's adroit footwork.

They go no more to howl about. The Falcons passed out, and Pug Lenahan leaped high in the air and snatched the sphere off a Falcon's fingertips. He whipped it to Tommy Lawler. Tommy cut loose from near the foul circle and found the basket again. He was blazing hot, couldn't seem to miss no matter what part of the court he fired from and from no matter what angle.

And the others, too, were finding themselves. It was a team, and they were clicking marvelously. A short time later in an exciting exchange under the basketball, Stew Murphy leaped high into the air to bat home a rebound. Bedlam broke loose in the arena. It was a thrilling exciting game. They were a mob of bug-eyed fans, stirred to the depths by the gallant fight of the Roundhouses.

But the Falcons were a tough nut to crack. They fought hard to beat back the Roundhouser counter-attack. They bounced back with a two-pointer on a long set shot and a foul conversion. Up and down the court the tide of battle surged, and the Roundhouses zoomed in and scored on a lay-up by Skippy Lane. The Roundhouses seemed to be gathering momentum, moving faster as the game progressed. By the end of the third quarter, attacking with the fury of the whirlwind, they'd cut the Falcon margin, 37-32.

Freeburg was trying frantically now to score, but the Roundhouses swarmed over them like gnats and they couldn't work the ball in close. They called time out, hoping to patch together the jagged edges of their attack. No result. If anything, it was the Roundhouses who benefited by the respite. They speeded up the tempo of play, racing like mad, breaking fast and sharp and moving the ball with scientific efficiency. The seconds slipped away, and, with four minutes remaining, Tommy Lawler burst like a flash through the Falcon defense and hit the cords for the ty-

ing counter. The score was 42-42, and frenzied applause for their spectacular, spirited comeback ripped from the stands.

But the Roundhouses weren't striving for a moral victory. They were out to win the game, and they never abated the power and drive of their attack. They rolled on, like an avalanche. They were smooth and slick, leaving the Falcons with their tongues hanging out from trying to run with them. In machine-gun fashion the Roundhouses racked up four more goals, and when the final whistle blew they were on the long end of the 50-42 count.

The tournament generally stretched out over a week, starting on Monday and winding up on Saturday. Saturday night was the big game, when the two teams surviving the dog-eat-dog preliminaries met for the championship. There were no seeded entries, the coaches of the competing teams drawing slips to make up the schedule.

The Roundhouses opened the tourney, opposing the Stratton outfit. It was a hard-fought game but the Roundhouses didn't disappoint their host of new-found but ardent rooters, carving a neat 53-46 triumph. In the second game of the double bill Les Dullies led his Acme Steel team to an easy 67-31 victory.

In the second round the Acme Steelers duplicated their runaway victory. On the other hand, the Roundhouse barely eked out a 37-34 win, coming from behind to turn the trick. It was a creditable showing, the Roundhouses remaining cool and unflustered even when trailing by a dozen points.

Thursday night, and the semi-finals before a packed house. Excitement ran high in Worthington and the adjacent area, and most of the interest was centered on the Roundhouses. Again they pulled it out with a hair-raising finish, storming from behind to score 45-44 in the closing seconds. On the other half of the bill the Acme Steelers hardly seemed to be raising a sweat as they breezed through to a 54-32 victory.

The big game for the cup was slated for Saturday at nine o'clock. Friday was, consequently, an off night. Lanny Warren scheduled a meeting at the Civic Center of the Roundhousers for seven o'clock. Half an hour after that time none of them had showed up. An uneasy restlessness seized Lanny Warren. He had a premonition something serious had gone wrong.

Then at eight o'clock there came a pounding on the door and Duke Gallagher burst into the Civic Center. He was panting, as if he'd run a long way. His eyes were wild with alarm, his face pale.

"You'd better come quick, Mr. Warren," he gasped. "Someone shot Tommy."

IT WAS a bombshell. Lanny hardly knew what he was saying.

"Where? How'd it happen? How bad is it?" he spluttered.

"I can't say how bad it is. I didn't wait around to find out. But there's an awful lot of trouble at the Acme coal mine. A gang got caught stealing coal out there. Tommy got mixed up in it somehow. I don't know. Believe me. Tommy's not the kind of guy to steal anything."

The three of them climbed into Ben's car and sped to the Acme Coal Mine. When they arrived there the place was ablaze with lights. Giant floodlights turned the night into day in the vicinity of the mine shaft, located on a gentle hill. The sound of angry voices drifted up, coming from the other road up the hill. The Roundhousers were in full force, and armed with a miscellaneous assortment of weapons. Some were armed with clubs and others with long poles, and they made a menacing array.

The owners and officials of the mine were standing there, waiting for them. Foremost in their ranks was Les Dulles, and when he saw Lanny Warren, he came trotting over, a torrent of words pouring off his tongue.

"Get those Roundhouse bums away from here," he screamed. "We're fed

up with their thievery. This isn't the first time, and we intend to teach them a lesson that will make it the last. We caught that young hoodlum, Lawler, red-handed. I'm convinced that he's the head of the bunch that's been making a habit of stealing coal from the mine—and everything else they can get away with."

"You seem pretty sure," said Lanny Warren. "Got any proof?"

"Plenty," snapped Dulles. "Enough to put an end to it all. And your basketball team, too. We're going to send every last one of those Roundhousers where they won't be getting much chance to play basketball or anything else. Reform school is the medicine they need."

"You got Lawler, but what happened to the rest of them?"

"The others slipped away, but don't worry about it—they're all working together. That's the way it is with the Roundhouse gang. Where you find one of 'em, you find 'em all."

Now the ominous sound of the Roundhousers' approach came loud and clear. A tragic battle loomed. Lanny Warren dashed over to intercept them.

"Listen to me," he shouted. "Put down those clubs and go on back to town."

The Roundhousers shuffled grimly up the hill, disregarding the entreaty of their mentor.

Pug Lenahan said, "Dulles has been asking for this for a long time. It's about time we gave him what he has coming."

"Put down those clubs," said Lanny, his voice low and intense, "or start using them on me. I'm standing here and fighting the first one who goes a step further."

The oncoming Roundhousers hesitated. Glances wandered, searching the faces of the others for some hint of how to behave. It was a tense, critical moment. And then magically, the tenseness eased away. Finally Pug Lenahan said, dropping the heavy stick he'd been brandishing:

"Okay, mister. You've always been on the level with us. We'll string along with you now and see what happens."

A STOUT man with a broad sharp-featured face strode up to Lanny Warren. Flanking him was the lean figure of Les Dulles.

"Thanks for stopping the fight," the stout man said. "But it wasn't really necessary. I wasn't going to let it come off. There won't be any fighting around this town, unless it's done on the basketball court tomorrow night. I don't think we'll have any trouble getting this affair straightened out."

"But you don't realize," Les Dulles complained to the stout man, P. T. Dulles, "what—"

"I realize," P. T. Dulles cut him short, "that you're burning up a lot of electricity that will have to be paid for. Get those out and send everyone home."

A half-dozen jtimes while the doctor was examining the wound, Tommy Lawler started to explain to Lanny Warren how he'd come to be involved in the affair at the mine. Each time he started Lanny shut him up, saying it would keep.

"Nothing to worry about," the doc announced. "Nothing at all. Just grazed his shoulder," and his eyes twinkled. "I wouldn't be at all surprised to see him playing some basketball tomorrow night. And I'll be there rooting for you guys..."

Tommy was still trying to explain how the incident had come about. He began, "Honest, I didn't do anything wrong, Mr. Warren. That guy—"

"You don't have to explain," Lanny interrupted. "I have a pretty good idea who was in back of it. It looks, though, like Dulles' little scheme might blow up in his face."

"That might improve it," said Ben Driggs.

STEW MURPHY banged the opening tip-off to Duke Gallegher. Les Dulles stormed into the Roundhouser center, trying to bull the leather away. It was more like a football tackle than a legitimate basketball tactic. Stew was knocked, spinning, to the hardwood. But there was an honest, impartial man officiating, and he signaled that a foul had been committed. Duke's underhand toss was

good and the Roundhousers led, 1-0.

The Acmes broke fast, working the ball down court. There was a spirited skirmish under the Roundhouser basket, ending when Stew Murphy snared a rebound. The fast-breaking Roundhouse attack got under way. Like something tied to a string, the melon shuttled from hand to hand in the revolving pattern of attack. The Acme team played a man-to-man defense, and the Roundhousers were unable to break a man free. Pug Lenahan drifted back to near mid-court, took careful aim and let the long one fly. It split the cords. Roundhousers 3, Acme 0.

But the Acme team was going to take a lot of beating. Les Dulles broke loose for a nifty one hander from up close. It was a smooth, tricky offensive that the Acmes displayed. Their strategy was clear. They were waiting for the Roundhousers to make the mistakes.

They did. Nixon of the Acmes darted in and stole a pass and dribbled down the middle of the court. He set himself as if to shoot, but instead flipped the melon to Les Dulles cutting toward the basket a half stride ahead of his man. Dulles' shot hooked off the backboard and sank through, and the Acmes led, 4-3. The Acme captain sneered continually. He made no attempt to conceal his contempt of and hatred for the Roundhousers. It was burning inside him like an angry volcanic fire.

Butterfingers plagued the Roundhousers. Skippy Lane fumbled and Les Dulles was on the ball like a flash, jostling Lane aside. He fired a long one and it found the basket. Acmes 6, Roundhousers 3.

The Roundhousers stepped up the pace. Duke Gallegher shipped the ball to Stew Murphy. Stew lined it into the right corner to Pug Lenahan. Pug launched himself into the air, getting his shot off. He was defenseless, having no legs under him, as Les Dulles slammed into him, toppling him savagely to the floor. The crowd booed, but there was no foul called. The referee's back was turned at the time, and he couldn't honestly call a foul on a play he hadn't seen.

Nixon captured the rebound, and the Acme swooped down the floor, uncorking a scintillating attack. It was dazzling and deceptive, the ball flying from hand to hand as if it had eyes. The culmination was a high pass to Crandall, who scored from the bucket.

IN THE BENCH, Lanny Warren frowned. It was obvious that without Tommy Lawler in there to knit their game together, the Roundhousers couldn't function in this fast company. They were giving it everything they had, but it just wasn't enough. Their attack lacked snap and precision. It was out of gear. They changed tactics, trying to slow up the Acme attack. No go.

At the end of the half the Acmes were out in front, 31-14. Lanny Warren didn't try to stir his charges up in the half-time interval. He could think of nothing he could say. The kids had played their hearts out, but it appeared as if they were overmatched.

On the first play of the second half, Les Dulles slipped away and dribbled in under the basket. But his timing was a trifle off and the ball rolled off the rim. A scramble followed. A jump ball was called.

Lanny Warren decided that he'd have to take a chance on Tommy Lawler's injured shoulder.

"Get in there, Tommy," he said.

Tommy went in, and the crowd's thunder beat down on him. They'd been hollering for him since early in the game.

Tommy took over the forward slot opposite Les Dulles. He proffered his hand, but Les Dulles sneered and turned his back on him. Tommy's lips tightened in a harsh line, and his jaw was set grimly. Play resumed.

Fresh and strong, Tommy hurled himself in front of Les Dulles to snare the tap. The Roundhouse attack roiled. The ball began shuttling from hand to hand. Lawler to Gallagher to Lane and back to Lawler. Over to Murphy. Dulles leaped in and grabbed the return pass meant for Tommy. With a spectacular flourish, he faked a pass. He began to dribble.

Then, like a hawk swooping on its prey, Tommy darted in. It was sheer larceny the way he stole the ball. Les Dulles was so startled that for seconds he stood in his tracks. Tommy spun, and then Dulles moved in on him. Arms flailed, and knocked Tommy to the floor. It was an uncalled-for exhibition of temper and poor sportsmanship.

The whistle shrilled, and the referee said, "Foul. Two shots."

P. T. Dulles frowned darkly from his seat. His eyes followed every movement his son made, as if he were looking at him for the first time and not liking what he was seeing.

Slowly Tommy climbed off the floor. He was mad clean through, his eyes flashing. He went to the foul line, tossed the ball up. Swish. One point. Again. Another point.

FROM THEN on Les Dulles couldn't do a thing. Tommy was all over him like a swarm of bees, snatching the ball out of his hands, giving him no chance to tear himself free.

Les Dulles had been the focal point of the Acme attack all season. He was being stopped cold now, and he lost control of himself, and the whole team seemed to fall apart.

And as they collapsed, the Roundhousers picked up. No dribbling for them. Short, snappy passes. Their formations clicked magnificently. Skippy Lane broke loose and poured a nifty through the hoop. No stopping them. And Tommy Lawler, the mighty mite, was the driving force, the guy making it all mesh. The crowd went wild as the Acme lead was cut to twelve then to ten, and finally eight points at the end of the third period.

Starting the last period, Tommy Lawler sank a long one to bring the count to Acme 47, Roundhousers 41.

Play was rough and hard and spine-tingling. The fans were on their feet and yelling themselves hoarse. Les Dulles tried to throw one in on a pivot shot. But Tommy Lawler hardly allowed the guy enough leeway to breathe. The little guy sprang into the air and came

down holding onto the sphere. Les Dulles in his anger and frustration fouled Tommy, and coolly Tommy swished the two tries through the cords.

Shooting from a difficult angle, Duke Gallagher poured the ball through the hoop. It was Acme 47, Roundhousers 45. Then Nixon sank a long desperation heave, and a minute later followed with another from mid-court.

Once again the Roundhousers buckled down to fight against overwhelming odds. It didn't seem possible, the way they went skidding over the floor, fighting desperately to gain possession of the ball. Time was running short. Skippy Lane batted home a rebound, and seconds later Duke Gallagher dribbled in for a lay-up. The score, Acme 51, Roundhouse 49.

With only seconds remaining, Tommy Lawler shaved the edge to one point, sinking a foul. Acme frantically tried to freeze the ball. Les Dulles grabbed a pass. Flying feet singed the hardwood as Tommy Lawler worried him. Then Dulles suddenly lost the ball. There was a red-hot mix-up as hands reached and contended for the melon.

Battling like a wildcat, Tommy Lawler froze onto the slithering ball. Les Dulles lunged at him. His face was strained, and deathly pale. Tommy dribbled a couple of steps, got his heave away. The ball arched high and far down court. There was a breathless silence, then the mob howling and screaming as the leather winged through the hoop. Seconds later the whistle sounded. The game was over, and the Roundhousers were on the heavy end of the 52-51 count.

BEN DRIGGS threw his arm around Lanny's shoulder. He said, "Well, that wraps it up, Lanny. And it's more than a ball game you've

given these kids. You've shown them that they can help themselves if they work hard and abide by the rules."

There was a big blow-out thrown in honor of the Roundhousers' victory. One place at the table remained untenanted. P. T. Dulles pointed to the vacant place and said,

"That son of mine won't be around here for awhile. Not until he learns a couple of things the hard way. I've sent him somewhere to start at the bottom." The stout old guy grinned and continued. "In case you want to know where the bottom is, it's the bottom of a mine I own in the soft coal region. Maybe starting at the bottom and working his way up will straighten him out."

The climax of the evening came when P. T. Dulles handed the big silver cup to Tommy Lawler. "This isn't the only thing I have for you," he said, "Any one of you who wants it can have a job at the mill or the mine, whichever you want."

Later that night the Roundhousers went en masse to the station to see Lanny Warren off. He was leaving town, and had announced at the banquet that he had accepted a coaching job at a big college. The Roundhousers watched as he boarded the train, standing by and trying to hold back their emotion and not doing a very good job of it.

Lanny Warren said, "I don't know how to thank you guys. You gave me the courage to take this job. I can't tell you how much you've done for me."

Tommy Lawler was spokesman for the Roundhousers. He stepped up to Lanny and said, "Just something to remember us by," handing Lanny the silver cup they'd won. "No matter what we did for you, you did a thousand times as much for us. And maybe some of us will be seeing you one of these days—just in case you need a couple basketball players."

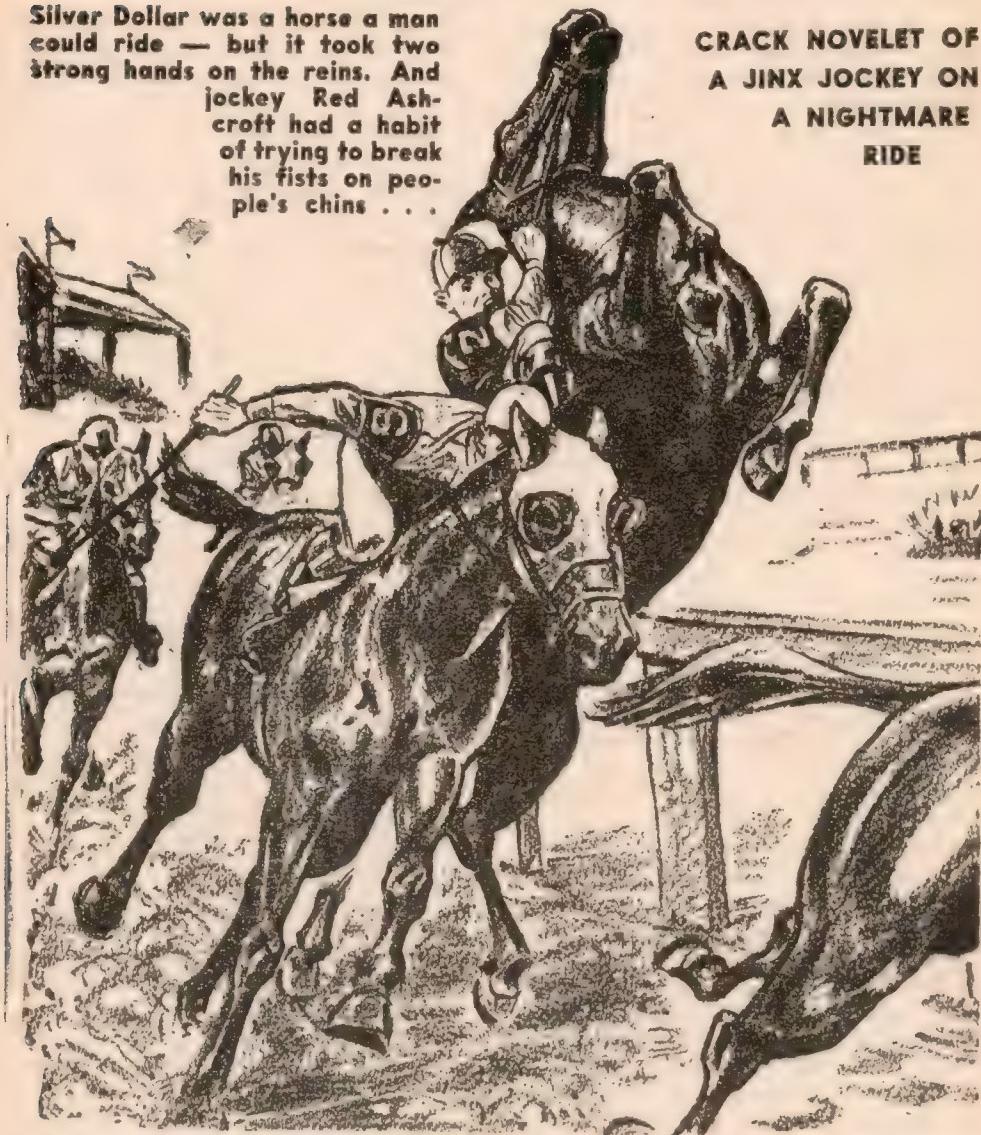


THUNDER IN THE STRETCH

By FLYNN V. LIVINGSTON

Silver Dollar was a horse a man could ride — but it took two strong hands on the reins. And jockey Red Ashcroft had a habit of trying to break his fists on people's chins . . .

CRACK NOVELET OF
A JINX JOCKEY ON
A NIGHTMARE
RIDE



THEY STOOD along the rail of the infield fence, near the finish line, in little groups, trainers and exercise boys and newspaper handicappers and clockers, watching the morning workouts. It was only September but the dawn air was chill and most of them wore top-coats or heavy sweaters. Puffs of cottony mist hung low over the track.

"Cuttyhawk lunged past him to the rail."

Everything was still, except for the distant crowing of a rooster and the far away tolling of the hour by some church bell.

Then there was the sound of pounding hooves down the stretch straight-away and one of the little groups along the rail grew tense, leaned over

the rail, with eyes squinched and squinting through the half light, toward the thoroughbred racing alone down the center of the track toward the finish wire. In this group were three men, two of them with the small, slight build of jockeys, the other man of less than average height but appearing to tower, beside the little men.

The horse flashed past them, almost the same color as the fog and it was difficult to see him. He was like a wraith and the only way you could spot him was by the bright red sweater of the kid who was riding him.

"A gray ghost," one of the little men said. His name was Sam Ashcroft. He was about thirty but looked five years older. His face was thin and drawn from too much dieting, too much hot room, trying to make weights. His eyes were tired, from too much riding, for too many years—nearly fifteen, to be exact.

"Like a damned gray ghost, that Silver Dollar of yours, Mr. Walterman," Sam Ashcroft said. And just to make sure he wasn't misunderstood, he added: "And one hell of a fine horse. I got dough says that was damn' fine time he just made."

The man between the two jockeys was looking at the stop watch in his hand. He was shivering a little and his lips looked bluish from the chill dawn air. But his chubby, middle-aged face was grinning. "You aren't just flappin' your lips, Sammy," he chuckled triumphantly. "One-O-five and two fifths for five and a half furlongs. Dam' fine time and you ain't kiddin'. Now if other things work out all right, we got ourselves a fifty grand 'cap in the bag. That Silver Dollar will make us all a piece of money."

"What are those other things you've got in mind, Mr. Walterman?" the third man in the group spoke up. His name was Will (Red) Ashcroft. He was Sam's kid brother. He was about the same build, same weight, only naturally so. He was thin and tense but not from any hot rooms and dieting. He burned up fat with his nervous energy. There were no lines

in his face, just the freshness of youth, of a kid in his late teens, still. But there was a toughness about the twist of the mouth and a cocksureness in the expression about the eyes. He wore no hat and his hair was crew-cut and fiery red. He wore a heavy turtleneck sweater against the morning chill.

ALEC WALTERMAN, the owner and trainer of Silver Dollar and a small stable of other horses, turned toward Red Ashcroft. Some of the smile slipped from his face. "Well son," he said, gently, "since you pin me down, since you seem to want it straight—the main other 'if' about Silver Dollar winning that 'cap, is his rider. A kid named Red Ashcroft. Know him?"

Color began to ebb into Red's thin young face and his lips drew tight. "Spill it," he said, tautly. "Don't beat around the bush. You mean if I ride Silver Dollar the way *you* think he should be ridden—instead of the way *I* think—the right way?"

Walterman said nothing. He just poked out his lower lip and held out the stopwatch to Red. "You just saw him run. That kid didn't hold him back. He rode him the way I think he should be ridden. Now look at the time."

"I heard the time," Red said. "I believe you. Only it don't make no never mind. You throw out that workout. That wasn't any race. It's different in a race. And Silver Dollar acts different in a race. You don't hold her back, you let her knock herself out in the early running, in a route and she'll fold up in the stretch run. You lose the race." He waved his hands excitedly. "Look, Mr. Walterman, you don't like the way I ride Silver Dollar, you get another boy for her. I'll take orders when they're smart, when they're good, when they're right. Not when it means losing a race."

Red Ashcroft turned suddenly away from the group, ducked under the fence and started across the track. Alec Walterman turned up his palms and made a face at Sam Ashcroft. "You see what I mean, Sammy?" he

said, resignedly. "What are you going to do with a kid like that? That temper. That damned redheaded temper. And stubborn!"

Sam Ashcroft's wizened features made a grimace. "Aw, he's just talkin' though his hat, Mr. Walterman," he pleaded. "When it finally comes time, he'll have thought it over. He'll do as you tell him."

"I dunno," the stable owner said. "He's gettin' big-headed. Too big for his britches. Just because he's made a name for himself as a hot-shot apprentice kid, his first year on the bigtime, doesn't mean that he knows more about horses than I do. Only twenty-five years I been around these merry-go-rounds. Only hundreds of horses I've owned and trained. Yet that kid—" He broke off, spluttering angrily to himself, now. "I ought to kick his tail and send him flyin' back to the leaky barn circuit!"

"You don't want to do that, Mr. Walterman," Sam said. "Like I say, he'll come around."

"You're damned right I don't want to kick him out," the older man said. "Not when he's the only kid can get any kind of a ride out of that damned grey colt. What is it, anyhow? What's he got? Does he whisper sweet nothings in his ear? Every other kid that mounts him Silver Dollar tosses out of the starting gate on his fanny. Red gets up on him and the critter is docile like a kitten. I don't get it. I think it's the devil plaguing me."

"Some nags are like that," Sam said. "That's all."

ALUCKY thing for that kid brother of yours, is all I can say," Walterman snapped. "But I'm getting fed up to here with him. I can't take much more." He pounded his index finger against Sam Ashcroft's thin chest. "I got a temper, too, you know. One of these days I'll say the hell with the whole thing, stick Silver Dollar in a claiming race and let some wise guy claim him. Then I won't need Red any more. He can go find himself another boss and somebody else to fight and argue with. You know what the other train-

ers say? They say: 'Hey, Alec, we hear that any day now, that kid is goin' to have you sweatin' off your beef and takin' the rides while he does the trainin'... You think I like people talking like that?"

"I know, I know," Sam said, appealingly. "But we'll bring him around, soon. And it'll be worth it all. You wait and see. If we can knock that stubbornness and temper out of him, Red's got the makings of another Sande or Arcaro in him. He ain't like me, Mr. Walterman. He ain't just no run-of-the-mill boy. He's a genius up on a mount—except that he thinks he knows it all. But he's temperamental just like all geniuses. Get that out of him and we'll have ourselves an ace jockey, in Red."

"Yeah," Walterman admitted grudgingly. "But these damned prima donnas are hard to take. And sometimes they aren't worth it. I've seen some of them just a flash in the pan after they lose their apprentice bug. So you'd best straighten him out quick, because I'm not going to take much more."

The two men ducked under the rail, then cut across the track through wisps of mist, both of them silent now, busy with their own thoughts. When they came to the jockey's quarters, Sam Ashcroft turned away to go inside and said "So long, Mr. Walterman. See you later."

"Take it easy, Sam," the stable owner answered. "And see what you can do with the kid. Like I say, I don't want to throw him out."

"I'll do my best, don't worry. I know how it is. If you fire Red, he'll have a hell of a job getting rides with anybody else. His rep is bad enough already for disobeying orders and blowing his top all the time. If you chuck him, it might mean his finish."

IN THE locker room of the jockey's building, the object of this discussion was standing shivering and huffing and beating his arms about, under the sting of a cold shower. When he stepped out and started up the circulation in his lean little mus-

cular frame again with a rough toweling, another jockey, who'd just come in from a workout, was getting undressed in front of his locker.

Francis Keenan was a short-legged, stocky old-timer who'd been around race tracks longer than anybody could remember. He had a round, puckish face, leathery and lined. His eyes were too pale a blue and never stayed still. Keenan wasn't very well liked. He had an unsavory rep for rough, foul tactics in close quarters and for riding for owners and trainers so crooked they could sleep on a cork screw.

Red Ashcroft had never known Keenan very well. But this morning, the old rider was all smiles and good humor. "I see you gassin' with the boss, this a. m." he said, now, grinning. "What's he tryin' to do, tell yo how to ride a horse?"

"Yeah," Red answered, quickly, glad to have a sympathetic ear. He told Keenan the trouble he was having with Waltermen about Silver Dollar. When he had finished, Keenan said:

"They're all like that—trainers and owners. They think they know more about ridin' than we do. Trouble is none of 'em ever was out there on a skin, all jammed up going around a turn, where a wrong move will get you bumped and thrown, maybe, and stomped to jelly by the rest of the field. They don't appreciate us."

"Waltermen ain't a bad egg," Red confided. "But this time he's wrong. I know what I'm talkin' about with Silver Dollar."

"I think you're right, kid," Keenan said. "I watched that skin run. I seen the way you rate him. You do a nice job. Only way to ride him. Waltermen gets tough about it, you tell him what to do with his stable. You come see me. I can get a smart kid like you, rides anytime." He winked and headed for the shower room.

Red Ashcroft bent to tie his shoe lace. He was grinning a little now. It had been good to hear somebody sticking up for him for a change. Usually everybody was picking on him. Maybe that Keenan wasn't such

a bad gent after all. He and Keenan seemed to hit it off pretty well. Other guys were probably just jealous of the wily old rider.

When he'd finished with his shoes, Red straightened up and held his right hand out in front of him, flexing the long strong fingers and staring at them, a wincing, slightly pained expression on his face.

"Damn' hand's bothering me again," he said, looking up as his brother, Sam came into the room. He looked down at the scarred and slightly enlarged knuckles. "Must be that damp early morning air. I've noticed it before."

"Yeah," Sam said. He watched Red working the fingers of the hand he'd broken badly in a fight a few years ago. A bone infection had set in and only clever surgery had saved the hand. It was still a little weaker than the other hand and the bones were brittle, would break easily again, the docs had warned him, but otherwise, it was in good shape and would never bother him with his riding too much.

"Y'see," Sam said, knuckling his whitish-blond head, his wise thin face twisted. "That's what temper did to you, Red. You blew your top and lit into a guy twice your size. You busted your paw on his cement head and got hell knocked out of you in the bargain. That temper and that stubborn streak's going to get you into worse trouble than that, even, if you don't tame it."

Red Ashcroft got to his feet. "Nuts, Sam," he said, testily. "Why don't you knock it off? Always preachin', always pickin' at me. Hell, I'm doin' all right."

SAM PUT his hand on his kid brother's shoulder. "Red," he said, solemnly. "I don't get any pleasure out of yappin' at you, all the time. It's just for your own good. You like the money you make, ridin' ponies, don't you? Well, let me tell you something. Us little guys got a break when we got The Big Apple. Where else can squirts like us make dough like we make? Racing's dam' good to us. You get thrown out of

racing, Red and you're licked for life. I could cite you some examples but I won't."

"Meaning what?" Red asked, bridling.

"Meaning, get hep, kid, and take orders when you get 'em from a smart trainer like Alec Waltermen. And he's not only the trainer, he owns the damned nag. Who's got a better right to give orders. Let's give you the benefit of the doubt and say he's wrong. That's no skin off your elbow. You obey orders and nobody's goin' to blame you if you lose."

Red's cheeks spotted up with the hot blood of temper. "Not much. Only the fans, only the sports writers. I got a name to make with myself. I won't make it by being a nice kid who takes orders well. I'll make it by bringing in winners. That's what a rider's for, isn't he, to win with a horse? I go out there to win a race. I do it, even if it mean disobeying orders."

"The fans, the sports writers!" Sam jeered. "The sooner you learn to say to hell with them, the better off you are. You can't win with the public. When you win, you're a hero, when you lose, you're a heel, whether it's your fault or not. And if you can't get any rides, how are you going to make that name for yourself? I ain't kiddin', Red, old Alec Waltermen is getting plenty buzzed off at you. If he throws you out, you'll be through with racing."

Red didn't say anything to that. His brothers words had cooled him down, scared him a bit. He loved riding horses. If he ever got blackballed, couldn't get any more rides, it would kill him. Sam was right—a jock wasn't good for anything else, once he'd been in the big-time.

"So why don't you wise up?" Sam followed through, speaking softly, soothingly. "Give Waltermen a break. Try it his way once. You're taking Silver Dollar in a mile-and-a-quarter go, Thursday. Try it Waltermen's way, that one race. What can you lose? If it turns out he's wrong and you lose the race by following his instructions, you'll show him he's wrong."

"All right, all right," Red gave in, grudgingly, putting the lock on his locker. "I'll try giving the colt his head, Thursday, and let him run himself ragged."

JUST THEN, Francis Keenan came out of the shower, passed by them on his way to the hot room, a towel wrapped around his chunky middle. He nodded to Sam and winked at Red. "Don't forget what I told you before, kid," he said. "Any time I can do something for you, lemme know. I like your guts."

The grin faded from Red's face when Keenan got out of earshot and Sam said: "What's that punk suckin' around you for, Red? Take my advice and steer clear of Keenan. He'll get you into hot water. He's strictly from rat, that guy."

"Look," Red grated, eyes blazing. "You're my brother, okay. Maybe you can advise me about racing but you can't pick my friends for me, too. Lay off that stuff. If I want to talk to Keenan, I do it. Nobody tells me how to run my personal life."

He spun around on his built-up, French-heeled Oxfords then and stalked off.

Thursday, that same week, Silver Dollar was entered in a cheap handicap for three-year-old's and upward. Ordinarily, the race wouldn't have attracted much attention. But it was warmup for a lot of entries scheduled to run in the Domino Stakes for fifty thousand, ten days later. So the stands were packed, even though it was a weekday, and the jockeys were a little on edge just before this feature race of the day.

Going out behind the outrider for the parade to the post and the short-pre-race workout, every once in awhile, Red Ashcroft leaned over Silver Dollar's neck and talked softly into his ear. The colt, always skittish and high strung before a race and known as a bad actor in the starting stall, quieted down at the sound of Red's voice. And Red was just as fond of the colt as the animal was of him. He sometimes figured it was maybe because they were both a little on the rebellious, outlaw side, hot-

tempered and high-strung.

He said softly, now, as the colt bobbed his head, went into a cakewalk: "Easy, there feller! Don't get yourself excited. You're going to run rings around these fugitives from the glue works. You make 'em look like a pack of hobby horses, today. Easy, boy!"

Instantly the horse settled down. The outrider turned, at the end of the stands and led them back toward the starting gate. Silver Dollar cut up a little fuss, being led into his stall but then he was all right and just stood there quivering, anxious to take off when the gate clanged shut on him. Red got bent over low on his neck and talked softly to him. There was a great hush over the whole park now as the stands stood silent, waiting for the announcer to bawl out over the P. A., "They're off!"

Up and down the gate, the horses stomped and fidgeted. A couple of them reared a little. There were the shrill sharp voices of the jockeys', trying to hold them, the shouted advice of assistant starters. And then they were all set. The bell clanged and the gates slammed open. They came rocketing out of the barrier all in a bunch, straining, fighting for the lead, to hold their spot.

Red had the center position, number five, with Silver Dollar but the way he broke it, it didn't make any difference. After two or three strides, he pushed out ahead of the pack. Red gave the colt his head as he'd been instructed, as he'd promised to do for this race. When they hit the clubhouse turn, he had a two length lead and had cut over to the rail.

By now, Silver Dollar was really tearing it off. Used to having strong hands reining him in, holding him back, the colt reveled in this new freedom by stretching himself out for all he was worth.

TINY FROWN lines knit between Red's eyes under his shatter-proof goggles. Heading into the backstretch, Silver Dollar was taking almost a four-length lead. The

stands were one great roar of sound. Red began to feel like a fool, just sitting there, not pulling up on the colt, not making any move to restrain him. He glanced back over his shoulder again. The rest of the pack were making no move to overtake him. They were letting Silver Dollar run himself ragged.

Red Ashcroft cursed. Tears of temper stung his eyes. He shouted. "The hell with 'em all. I can't do it. I can't Orders be damned! I can't let this colt kill himself like this!"

He began to pull up on the reins, steadily, staunchly. Silver Dollar fought him for a few minutes, tried to shake loose. Red's wrists got numb, especially on his good hand, the one that was doing most of the work. It took every ounce of strength he could put into it to pull Silver Dollar up. He was a big colt and strong and he liked to run. He gave Red a fit for a few minutes. But finally the jockey's strong hands and wrists won out. Silver Dollar eased up half way to the stretch turn. Red heard the other horses pounding up behind him.

Then the leaders were sweeping past him and he found himself running in about fifth position. He let Silver Dollar out just enough to hold him in that spot, rounding the last turn. Hitting into the stretch, Red tried to ease over onto the rail, hoping to be able to cut through a slot there when he made his stretch run. But just as he got set, a bay gelding named Cuttyhawk lunged in ahead of him, cut him off from the rail. Silver Dollar almost ran up onto Cuttyhawk's heels.

At the last moment, Red had to pull up and then carry him out and around Cuttyhawk. That cost him time and ground. Up ahead he saw the three leaders bearing down the long stretch straightaway, several lengths ahead. Directly in front of him now, were two more horses. Another was coming up alongside of him. He was going to get boxed in. He wouldn't be able to make his run.

Crazy with anger at getting tied up like that, Red gave a little cry of encouragement to the colt, gave

him a hard lick with his bat and drove for the narrow space between the two horses ahead. He went through, with stirrups clinking together on both sides and with only a fraction of an inch to spare. Then he was clear and bearing down on the leaders.

He was surprised, now, to see that one of these two leaders was not Cavalliere, a stout stretch runner and a tough horse to beat, the main threat against Silver Dollar in this race and the one he had to fear in the big Stakes a week from Saturday. He wondered briefly what had happened to Cavalliere and why the roan gelding wasn't in the contention in this stretch run. Then he concentrated on running down the leaders before they hit the wire.

He saw that they were beginning to flatten out, up there and if he could get Silver Dollar going, he might still make it. But they were in pretty close to the rail and there was a chance he might not be able to get Silver Dollar through on the inside. So he took a chance and carried her to the outside and layed on with the whip. That was something he seldom did with the colt and she leaped forward in a frenzy, gobbling up the ground between her and the two front-running horses.

He shot past them in the outside, a few yards before the wire and took the race by a good half a length. Now that it was over, he eased up on Silver Dollar and he let the tension flow out of him. A grin broke out on his sweat-and-dust-streaked face. He leaned over Silver Dollar's neck and told him: "Nice going, chum. You took it going away. They never had a chance. You do the same thing in the Domino and little Red will be swimming in the big gravy."

COMING BACK to the enclosure for the after race weight-in, though, some of the good spirits left Red. He saw Alec Waltermen standing there, waiting for him. Walterman's chubby face was flushed with anger. His thick, iron-gray brows were pulled together and there was an ugly pout to the stable-owner's full lips.

Red rode Silver Dollar into the enclosure first, turned half around in the saddle and showed his teeth for the photographers. Then he dismounted and unstrapped his tack, weighed in, started for the jockey's quarters. Someone from the rail yelled: "Nice goin', Red. Beautiful ride!"

Then Alec Waltermen grabbed his arm. "That's what *he* thinks," Waltermen said. "That ride stunk up the whole track. What's the matter with you, you mule-headed little bunk? Why didn't you do what you were told?"

Red's ears burned. His cheeks got hot and he could feel the red hair standing up on the nape of his neck. "Don't talk to me like that, Waltermen," he barked. "I won the race for you. What more do you want? I tried to let that colt run wild like you said, but it was murder. He was burning himself out. He wouldn't have lasted at that pace and they would have run him down in the stretch."

"How do you know?" Waltermen countered. "You never tried it. That horse has got heart and speed to burn. Give him a long lead like that and he'll steal any race. But you won't give him a chance. What's the matter, wouldn't it look good to the grandstands if you won a race too easily? You like to make that last second hero's finish, don't you, you little balloon-head?"

"Now, wait a minute," Red said through his teeth. His fists clenched.

"Nuts!" Waltermen told him angrily and stalked away. "I'll see you later."

Up in the dressing room, Red Ashcroft didn't join in with the good natured banter and joshing of the other riders. When somebody tried to kid with him, he snarled at them to shut up and finished dressing in a hurry and left the locker room.

He found Alec Waltermen waiting for him outside in the paddock. The old man was pacing up and down, nervously, his fists clenched behind him, sweat glistening on the sunburned bald spot on his head.

Red took a deep breath and went up to him to face the music. Figur-

ing a good offense is the best defense, he charged right in. "Take it easy, Mr. Waltermen," he said. "You'll blow a valve. For an owner who just won an important prelim 'cap, you don't look very happy."

"Happy?" the big man wheeled on him. "What makes you think I should be happy? You think that small purse means anything? Sure I like to get the money. But what I'm after is the big one a week from Saturday. And here I am stuck with a horse that can win it with the right ride and a dumb chump of a jockey who won't give it to him."

"What was the matter with that ride, today?"

"You were just damned lucky. You had to whip hell out of Silver Dollar to make it. That's never happened before. A colt like that's liable not to take to the bat sometime and you'll be stuck. You were lucky, too, that Cavalliere got left at the post and then got boxed off going around the stretch turn, couldn't make his move. You were lucky, too, that Cavallier didn't have his regular rider up instead of that kid who was too dumb to get him out of the hold. If Branner had been up on that gelding, he would have beat you out in the stretch. Silver Dollar can't match Cavallier in a stretch duel. The only way he can beat that gelding is to steal the race in the early going."

"In other words, you don't like my riding?" Red snarled, his thin face pale with anger, now. "Well, like I said before—"

"Skip it," Waltermen cut him off. "I'm beating you to it. You're through. Washed up. You don't ride for me anymore mule-head!"

RED ASHCROFT stood there, trembling, a choking in his throat. He tried to find words but couldn't for a moment. Finally he managed to get out: "That's fine with me, you two-bit track gypsy. I wouldn't ride another skin for you, for all the money in the world." He bent a little, dropped his right fist to his knees, started to bring it up. "And here's a little farewell present from me to you."

But before he could swing the punch, somebody grabbed his arm, held it tight, stopped him. He turned, trying to drag his arm loose. It was his brother, Sam. Sam said, quickly: "Cut it out, punk. Keep your skin on. That's not going to get you anywhere. You haven't really got anything against Mr. Waltermen. You only got what's coming to you. Do you want that temper to get you into more trouble?"

Red pulled his arm loose, turned around but Waltermen was gone. Red was alone with his brother. "That's right," he said. "Side in with him, against your own flesh and blood. That's the kind of a brother, you are."

A hurt expression came over Sam's tired, drawn and sensitive features. "Red, kid, take it easy," he begged. "You knew that isn't so, I'm only talking for your own good. Like always."

"Like hell, you mean! Red contradicted. "You're probably tickled pink. You're probably going to get a chance to ride Silver Dollar yourself in that big race, now. Pretty soft for you to get a good hide to ride, after hopping Waltermen's old dogs for so long. I imagine this'll set you up pretty well with Jane, too. You'll be on top now—and me on the bottom. But not for long, wiseheimer. I'll get other mounts. And if we run against each other in a race, watch yourself. Get in my way and I'll run you off the track."

"Red, you don't want to talk like that," Sam pleaded. "You and I, we—"

Red didn't hear the rest of it. He walked away. He left the paddock and the racing park, picked up his car and started to drive to the rooming house in Bellaire, where he was staying. He felt lousy, now, with reaction from his burst of temper setting in. He'd never had a fight like that with Sam, before. Sam had been one hell of a swell brother to him. Sam had put him through high school, after their folks were killed in the fire. Sam had taught him how to ride, got him jobs with stables as exercise boy, carried him around with

him, from track to track, after he left school, finally got him his first ride, with Mr. Waltermen, the only man for whom Sam rode, by mutual agreement.

Red wondered what had gotten into him to shoot off his mouth that way to Sam. Because besides being a good egg, Sam was smart, too, in his own way. Sam knew his stuff about steeds. He was a fine, honest, dependable rider. Nothing flashy or sensational. But he was always up in there, seldom made a wrong move. He just didn't have much color. And so the racing public and the surf writers never gave him much of a play. Well, now, he'd probably finished himself up with Sam, too.

Not that he really gave a damn, though, he told himself. Because he was right and they were wrong. He knew that. If he'd run his own kind of race, this afternoon with Silver Dollar, he wouldn't have gotten into any trouble at all. He'd have just held him off the pace until after the last turn and then cut him loose as usual. It was because he tried to carry out his instructions, in the beginning, that he got the colt jammed up there on the last turn.

Red told himself that he'd show them, now. He'd get rides with other stables and he'd turn up the track. He'd break records. He'd make himself the most talked about rider in the game. Back in his rooming house, Red flopped down on his bed and corked off for his morning nap, dreaming of the headlines on the sports pages, he was going to make, of the way Sam and Alec Waltermen would come crawling back to beg his forgiveness and admit they were wrong.

THAT AFTERNOON, Red, accompanied by Jane Frazier, tiny and dark-haired and lovely in a white crushed linen sport suit, watched the races from a seat in the clubhouse stands. Between races, at the clubhouse bar, he approached some of the other stable owners. But he got the same answer from all of them. They'd look a little uncomfortable, tug at

their collars and tell him:

"Why, I'm sorry, Red, but I'm all tied up with my regular boys. Don't have any mounts open. Like to help you out, son, but it's out of the question right now."

They gave Red a slow burn with that stuff. He knew that a couple of them were in the market for a good rider. But talk had gotten around. They didn't want any part of a kid who disobeyed instructions in a race.

Back in their seats, later, Red told Jane: "They think they're smart, those guys. But you wait and see. A month from now, they'll be begging me to take a mount out for them.

Jane Frazier put her hand over his. "Red," she said, softly. "Why don't you just take it easy for a few days and think this whole thing over? Maybe you'll see where Sam and Alec Waltermen are right. You know very well that you do let that redheaded temper and stubborn streak sometimes get the best of you."

He snatched his hand away, scowled at her, a little surprise showing in his gray-blue, sharp eyes. "You, too?" he said. He started to jump all over her for siding with the others against him, but at the last minute thought better of it. He didn't want to get Jane down on him, too. That would be the last straw. He and Jane had been going together since high school. They were planning to get married in another few months.

Everybody liked Jane Frazier and told Red how lucky he was to get a gal like her. Especially his brother Sam, told him that. Red knew that Sam, in his quiet, unassuming way, was also madly in love with his brother's girl. But only Red knew that because Sam covered his emotions well as far as anybody else was concerned. Red knew that Sam would never make a play for Jane as long as she belonged to him. He didn't have to worry about Sammy boy.

They watched the rest of the races in a kind of strained silence. They watched Sam Ashcroft win two in a row, with his calm, cool professional riding. And Red was surprised to hear the stands give Sam a little cheer

after his second win on a long shot.

On the way home, Red and Jane had a mild quarrel again about Red's bustup with Walterman. She thought that Red should go to the stable owner and apologize and promise to take orders like any other boy, go back to working for him. But Red stuck to his guns and refused. They made up, somewhat before Red let Jane off at her house. But somehow, things were not quite the same with them. There was a strain in their relationship. That strain became a wide open breach a few days later.

WHEN RED found himself completely on the outside, black balled, unable to get rides with any of the better stables, he finally remembered his talk of a few days ago with Francis Keenan. He went to see the old rider and Keenan introduced him to Si Tinsdale, a small stable owner, with three old platters and unsavory reputation. Red wasn't crazy about the idea of working with Si, but let himself be talked into riding an eight year old mare named Nellie Bly, the next day.

"You'll win with her, too, easily," Si told him. He was tall, cadaverous looking man, with sunken eyes and a small, seamed, mean looking mouth. "We got her primed for this heat. Keenan's been riding her the last four or five races and it's the funniest thing—" he broke off, laughing slyly. "—but he hasn't been able to do any better than last, any of those rides. But we got a feeling, she'll come in today. So don't you make any mistakes, kid."

Red Ashcroft knew what they were up to. It was an old gag. Take a horse, keep dropping her down in company, getting down in a spot where she can take one easily, they turn her loose, at big odds. The stable gets down on her with their last nickel and clean up. Ordinarily Red wanted no part of such a deal. But he was desperate for a ride. To show Walterman and Sam that he didn't need them, Red accepted the mount.

Francis Keenan was scheduled to ride another horse in the race, the

second choice in the betting and a good animal, owned by another small stable owner, a friend of Tinsdale's. Red had a hunch that it was fixed up for Keenan to pull his mount, Minnehaha and make sure she didn't spoil things for Nellie Bly. But he shrugged off his feeling of guilt at being part of any such deal. It wasn't his fault that things like that went on. He'd make a straight ride and nobody could blame him for that.

Just before the race, though, two things happened. When he was getting up into the saddle on Nellie Bly, Tinsdale came over and tucked something into the side of Red's boot. He said: "Those are for you, son. I like to make sure my boy has plenty of incentive to ride."

Red's eyes narrowed. He reached down and pulled out two hundred dollar mutual tickets on number Six, his horse. He stared at the tickets. Nellie Bly would go off at about thirty to one. If he brought her in, that would be six thousand bucks those tickets would be worth. He took a deep breath and held the tickets out to Tinsdale.

"You keep 'em. I don't bet on my mounts," he said.

Tinsdale's long, bony face showed surprise and disappointment. "Don't be a fool. Take 'em," he said. "There for you. You might as well get your cut of this deal."

"I don't want 'em," Red said, his voice getting sharp. "Take 'em back or I'll tear 'em up."

Reluctantly, the stable owner took the tickets from Red. He looked worried. He said, whining: "Look here, kid, you ain't going to cross me up, are you?"

"You'll get a good ride." Red told him curtly. "I'll ride him straight and that's all. If he wins, he wins, that's all I care about."

He moved Nellie Bly away, then, lined up with the other horses to parade out onto the track. He saw Francis Keenan look back at him, grinning, giving him the wink. He saw, too, his brother, Sam, standing to one side and Sam had spotted that bit of by-play between Red and Keenan. Red

had never seen such a look of disgust on his brother's face.

IT WASN'T much of a race. Like Tinsdale had said. It was Nellie Bly all the way. She broke fast and took an early lead. But halfway around, Keenan on Minnehaha, came up alongside, running well and then passed him. They stayed that way, right into the stretch. For a few moments, it looked to Red as though maybe Minnehaha might beat him out. The other mare was holding her head and seemed to have plenty left. Red drove for home, hand-riding hard.

A couple of hundred yards from the finish wire, he saw Keenan look back and make sure it was Red coming up on him. Then he saw Keenan deliberately ease up his own mount and let Red catch him. It was done smoothly and expertly and unless you were watching for it, were right up close, like Red was, you couldn't have been sure. But Red was sure.

Especially when he swept passed Minnehaha and saw Keenan deliberately swerve her over to the rail, then to block the favorite who was coming up fast along the inside and might just possibly have stolen the race in the last stride. But after that, there was no question. Nellie Bly took it easily.

When they were riding back to the enclosure, the stands gave Keenan a sound booing. As he passed Red, Keenan grinned wryly, said: "The hell with 'em. I'm going to catch it for that. Probably get set down for awhile. But who cares. I cleaned up on that plug of yours."

Red Ashcroft was white with fury at the idea of letting himself, even innocently, have any part in such a rotten, crooked betting coup. He weighed in and left the enclosure. There was no satisfaction over the win he'd just made. His stomach felt hollow. He heard the crowd's roar as the objection sign flashed. But he didn't even look around. He knew he was all right. They wouldn't take down his number. The objection would be against Keenan, who had placed second, by blocking the fav-

orite. Keenan and Tinsdale had planned it well. They hadn't taken any chances.

He waiting outside in the paddock for Keenan and Tinsdale, after the races were over that day. He was disappointed, though. Keenan didn't show up. But Tinsdale came out. He was showing his snaggle teeth in a whopping, crooked grin. He was happy. Red knew that he'd probably made fifty grand on his cleanup with Nellie Bly.

"Beautiful job, kid," he said and put his arm around Red's shoulder. "You heard, I guess, that Keenan got set down for ninety days because of that ride. That's tough, but he'll get along on what he made today. What I'm getting at, is how would you like to ride for me regular while Keenan isn't around. We got several other little deals cooking and—"

"Well, I'll tell you, Tinsdale," Red said. He took the tall man's arm from around his shoulder, very gently. "It's like this—"

He went up on his toes and brought his left hand, his good one, up from the knees. It caught Tinsdale flush on his lantern jaw. A surprise look crossed his face. His eyes glazed and crossed. He sat down hard.

RED RUBBED his knuckles and spat upon the ground and walked away from there fast. That night, he lay on his bed in his room, for a long time, smoking, staring up at the ceiling, going over things in his mind. Then he got a telephone call. It was Jane Frazier. She didn't have much to say. She simply told him in a crisp, cool tone:

"I just wanted to tell you that you can skip our date for tomorrow night, Red. And any other night, for that matter."

"Wh—what?" he stammered. "Why, honey? What do you mean?"

"I mean we're through, Red. You've washed yourself up with me, too. I don't want to have anything to do with any man who rides for Si Tinsdale. Especially in a race like that one this afternoon."

"Hold it a minute, Janie," he

pleaded. "I didn't have any part in that. I just rode Nellie Bly. I didn't know anything about Keenan pulling in his mount or about him planning to block off any opposition. I—"

He stopped talking. He was suddenly holding a dead wire. Jane had hung up on him.

That night, Red Ashcroft went out and got roaring drunk. But it didn't seem to help. The deeper under the weather he got, the more he thought about Jane. He remembered every time they'd ever gone out together, every time he'd kissed her, the feel of her cool fingertips on his fevered forehead, once, when he'd been sick. He phoned her a half dozen times that night. But she wouldn't even answer.

Three days later, after a terrific binge, he finally got to talk to Jane, by waiting outside her house, cornering her. He told her that he was smartened up, now. He was willing to admit that he was wrong. He'd had enough. If she'd give him another chance, he told her, he'd go to Alec Waltermen and apologize and plead for an opportunity to ride Silver Dollar in the big race, the day after tomorrow. He'd promise to take orders and to never lose his temper again.

Jane looked at him, saw his bloodshot eyes and the dark circles underneath them. She saw the beard stubble on his face and the humiliation and misery in his expression. For a moment, her lovely features softened. She touched his hand, lightly.

"We—we'll see, Red," she whispered. "You do all that. You prove to me that you've changed and that you'll never let that temper get you into any trouble again and—well—we'll see."

He went home then and ate his first meal in three days. He slept around the clock and then he went to see Alec Waltermen. He approached Waltermen in the stable, sheepishly, hat in hand. He said:

"Mr. Waltermen, you got time to hear a jerk say a few words?"

The stable owner looked a little cool but finally he nodded curtly.

Red said: "I want to ride Silver Dollar for you in that big go-round, Saturday. I want to ride her your way, Mr. Waltermen, win or lose. I won't let you down."

Waltermen pulled at his full lower lip. "I dunno, Red," he said, uncertainly. "There's a lot of bad talk about you, after you rode for Tinsdale the other day in that fouled-up race."

Quickly, Red gave him the whole story on that. When he'd finished, he added: "I'm not alibiing out, altogether, Mr. Waltermen. I know I should never have agreed to ride for that guy in the first place. But I was desperate for a ride with another stable, like I said. But I didn't pull anything crooked. If I'd known they'd panned any deal as rotten as that, I'd have backed out. You know that."

FOR A LONG moment, Alec Waltermen didn't answer. Then he suddenly grinned and stuck out his hand. "I believe you're telling it straight, kid. All right, I'll give you another chance. Don't let me down."

"You can depend on that, sir," Red told him, happily.

That night, he broke the good news to Sam. Somehow, though, his brother didn't seem too excited. "What's the matter, Sammy boy?" Red wanted to know. "Why the gloomy look? I thought you'd be tickled to death to hear your goony kid brother finally got hep to himself."

Sam didn't answer right away. His drawn, tired features creased in a frown. Finally, he said, hesitantly: "I'd be damned glad, Red. If I could be sure it was true. But I can't help thinking that you told Alec once before—several times—in fact, that you'd carry out his orders. But then in the heat of the race, you failed to do it."

"That was different," Red explained. "That was before. I've changed, now, Sam. You don't have to worry. I'll let Silver Dollar run his head off if that's what's Waltermen tells me to do."

"You know what I'm afraid of, Red," Sam said. "I don't think you

have any control of that damned temper. You've let it run wild, too long. I think you mean well and intend to do what you say. But in the excitement of that fifty grand race, I'm afraid you're going to go crazy and forget all about your promises. You might not be able to help yourself, kid."

"Don't be silly, Sam," Red scoffed. "Getting mixed up with those stinkers, Keenan and Tinsdale—getting the brush-off by Jane—that all straightened me out, Sam. I'm a brand new guy."

Sam Ashcroft changed the subject, then and nothing else was said about it. But somehow he didn't seem like himself. He seemed preoccupied and every once in awhile, Red caught Sam looking at him strangely, with a funny glint in his eye. Just before they parted for the night, Sam said:

"Just one word of warning, Red. If you cross Alec Waltermen up this time, you're through for good, for all time. With Alec, with me—and with Jane. I know that for a fact."

Red just grinned and told him not to worry.

THE NEXT day, for the first three races, Red Ashcroft sat outside one of the windows on the roof over the verandah of the jockeys building, with a couple of other apprentice boys who weren't scheduled to ride until the last race, he sat there, soaking up the sun, stripped to the waist and only wearing the bottom of his silks and his riding boots. He kept thinking about the way things had turned out and the big race that was coming up. Especially, he thought about the things his brother, Sam, had said last night.

It had been worrying him a little. A vague gnawing kept coming into his mind that maybe Sam was right and when the chips were down, in the race this afternoon, he would blow his top again and run Silver Dollar his own way instead of Waltermen's hoping for the best, that the horse would win, anyhow. He said a little prayer, now, that it wouldn't turn out that way, that he really did have

the strength to hold back his temper and do what he was told.

He got up then and went inside, to take a couple of salt tablets and sip some hot black coffee. The Fifth race was coming up and the big one was after that. His brother Sam was riding another one of Waltermen's mounts in the Fifth. Red wanted to wish him luck. He found Sam by his locker, half dressed. Sam was reading a note on a small piece of pink, women's stationary. Red recognized it right away. There was a fancy monogram on it that spelled J.E.F.

Red's jaw dropped in surprise. He said: "What's Jane Frazier doing, writing notes to you, Sam?"

Sam looked up and scowled. He said softly: "What do you care? She's not your girl anymore. None of your damned business. You had your chance with Jane."

"What!" For a moment, Red couldn't say anything but stare. Then suddenly he reached out and snatched the note from his brother's hand. He glanced at it quickly: It said:

Darling Sammy: Good luck, honey! Bring this one in for me and show that bigheaded little brother of yours that he's not such a hotshot. Remember last night, Sammy, when I kissed you? That was for luck. See you tonight. (signed) Janie."

Something like the shattering of a giant electric bulb happened in Red Ashcroft's brain. For a moment he couldn't see. There was nothing but a red haze in front of his eyes. As if it were somebody else talking, he heard himself say:

"Jane wrote that—to you, Sam? You—you've been going out with her. The two of you, double-dealing on me when I'm down. Sam, I didn't think you'd pull a stunt like that."

Sam snatched to grab the note back from Red's hand. "Give me Jane's letter, punk and leave me alone," he snarled.

HE DIDN'T get the letter. Red let it flutter to the floor. At the same time, he caught Sam's arm. He shoved him off balance with his left and dropped his right to the floor, the fingers balled into a tight fist. He

brought it up with every bit of power in his small, compact body. It exploded against Sam's jaw. He staggered back against the locker. A hot lick of lightning-like pain raced up Red's arm from his hand.

He grabbed at it. "My hand!" he cried. "Damn you, Sam, you've made me hurt my hand."

Sam Ashcroft sat on the floor, against the locker where he had fallen for a moment, shaking his head dizzily, feeling of his discolored jaw. Then his eyes cleared. He saw Red standing there, his face twisted in pain, holding his injured hand, the one with the brittle bones, that had once been broken so badly.

"That really fixes you up, doesn't it, kid?" Sam said through his teeth, a triumphant gleam in his eye. "You broke your hand again. Now you can't ride Silver Dollar. You can't ride a strong horse like that, one-handed. You're really finished. Alec will have to let me ride him. I'll show you a real ride. I'll give Jane something to really be proud of me about."

"Why, you—" Red said and started for his brother once more. But a couple of the other jockeys held him back, calmed him down. When he'd cooled off a little, one of the trainers said:

"How about that hand, Ashcroft? Is it really busted? If it is, you'd better cancel your ride. You can't ride a hard-headed horse like Silver Dollar with one mitt."

Red remembered his brother's triumphant grin, his last words. He took a deep breath and somehow forced a smile though the grimace of pain on his pale, thin face. He forced himself to lift up the injured hand. It was almost numb now.

"What, this paw?" he said. "Hurt it for a moment, but it's all right now. Nothing serious."

The trainer thought he'd better go down and let the doc take a look at it, anyhow, to be sure, but Red laughed the suggestion off. He carefully avoided showing any symptoms of pain and just let the broken hand hang loose at his side. He had a little trouble, getting into his silks but finally made it. The hand was so

numb, now and Red was so full of anger and bitterness at his brother and at Jane Frazier for the bum deal they'd both given him, that he hardly noticed it at all. Only he knew that it would be useless to him in his ride on Silver Dollar. He's have to ride one-hand.

There was a great buzzing sound of excitement as they paraded past the stands to the starting gate. Silver Dollar seemed to sense that this was no ordinary race and he was very skittish. Red had trouble holding him down, quieting him, with only one hand. But he kept leaning close to the colt's neck, talking to him soft and soothingly as though he were a baby.

For a moment, when they were getting into the gate, Silver Dollar reared up and almost unseated him. But at the last moment, he clung tight with both knees, hung on. They got all the horses into the gate. Silver Dollar had number eleven, the outside post position. It was a good spot for her, if she got off fast.

He sat there, listening to the other boys steady their mounts, begging the starter to hold it just another second. When they had passed the tote board, on the way to the post, Red had noticed that Silver Dollar was a to one favorite, with Cavaliere, Johnny Branner, his regular rider, up, second choice, at five-to-two. Cavaliere, had the inside post but it wouldn't bother the roan gelding much. She'd shuffle back and stay off the pace and wouldn't make her bid until the stretch run, anyhow.

THET LAST thing Red thought of before the bell clanged and they were off, was that somewhere up in those stands, Jane Frazier, was watching this race. She'd called him swell-headed and had wanted Sammy to show him up. Well, he'd show her.

They broke unevenly but Red got Silver Dollar off all right, well on the outside and in third position. He held tight with his one good hand, bent low over Silver Dollar's neck. His bad hand was tucked out of the way in his lap, throbbing dully with pain, but he hardly noticed it.

He gave the colt his head and coming into the clubhouse turn, the great gray colt, had overtaken the leaders and was moving into the lead. Rounding the turn, she was half a length in front and moving away fast. They hit the long straightaway of the back stretch and Red fought off his natural inclination to pull in with his one good hand. With no restraint on him Silver Dollar seemed to take off and fly.

Like the last time, halfway down the backstretch, the colt had taken a three length lead and was stretching it out with every leap and bound. The sound of the crowd was like a huge waterfall in a cave, a solid roar of sound that hurt your ears. Panic swept over Red, then. He kept looking back and saw his lead on the other growing. He felt Silver Dollar's labored straining beneath him.

He groaned. "Easy, boy, easy!" he cried. "You'll never make it. You'll never last out. Slow, fella!"

He tried to rein in then, with one hand. But the colt was too strong for him. He was running wild and he loved it. Red couldn't stop him. They hit the stretch turn and Red took one last look around. He had opened up a six length lead. In desperation, he took his bad hand from his lap, tried to get it up on the reins. It didn't work. There was no strength in the broken hand, only pain. He cursed Sam, then, with all his heart. If Silver Dollar quit in the stretch because he couldn't hold her in, it was going to be Sam's fault. Nobody else's. Because orders or no orders, he wouldn't have lost this race, he would have taken the colt in, saved some of her strength for the final rush.

And then he was around the final turn and into the stretch, going past the stands. He felt Silver Dollar begin to falter. He glanced briefly back over his shoulder. The lead had dropped back down to three lengths. They were gaining on him. And on the far outside, a horse was bearing down fast, coming up like all the harpies in hell were hammering after him. Red knew it was Cavalliere, with Johnny Branner beating and driving the roan gelding for all he was worth

in a terrific stretch push.

There was nothing else to do, so Red just layed his cheek against Silver Dollar's neck and worked with her, urged her crying: "Go to it, boy! Stick it out! Run your heart out in this one, baby! Maybe you can hold it, steal it from them!"

He didn't look up again. He heard hoves pounding close behind him. And then they were beside him. He pushed Silver Dollar and yelled encouragement into the colt's ear. From the corner of his eye, he saw the photo-finish mirror flash by and knew that it was all over. He didn't know whether he had won or not. He hardly cared.

He ran Silver Dollar a long way around, to cool him off. He was one of the last back to the enclosure. The stands were one giant bumble-bee roar of excited murmuring, waiting for the photograph of the finish to be developed, waiting for the number to go up.

AND THEN the murmuring broke into a boom of sound and Red glanced up at the tote board, saw the number of eleven—Silver Dollar's number—in the top, the winning spot. The rest of it was a little hazy. He remembered vaguely, posing for pictures and being presented with a cup. But the next thing he knew after that, he was in the infirmary and the track sawbones was bandaging up his hand. He was telling him good news, too.

"It isn't broken, son," he was saying. "Just a bad sprain: Be as good as new in a few weeks, if you take care of it."

Outside in the paddock, a little later, he found Alec Walterman waiting for him. The owner's round, pudgy face was wreathed in a smile. He held out his hand but Red didn't take it. Red didn't grin back at him, either. He didn't feel very good. He didn't seem to care about winning the race. All he thought about was what his girl, Jane and his brother, Sam, had done to him, today.

"Beautiful ride, Red," Walterman said. "For once you obeyed orders. You deserve a lot of credit, Red. And

I was right, wasn't I, about letting the colt have her head and stealing the race?

"You were right," Red admitted. "But I don't deserve any compliments. I—well—I tried to defy your instructions, Mr. Waltermen. I would have, if I could. But I couldn't. That brother of mine made me mad, made me hit him and I hurt my hand. So I couldn't have held Silver Dollar back, no matter how much I wanted to. Sam—" He broke off suddenly and a queer look came across his face.

He saw that Alec Waltermen was laughing, now, not just smiling, and was rubbing his bald spot. "Wait a minute," Red said. "What's so damned funny? Is something going on around here? Maybe I'm dumb, but I don't get it." Red didn't, quite. But something gnawed at his mind that told him this whole thing was not quite right.

Then he heard Waltermen saying: "You fell for it all right, son. It was a wild idea and I was afraid of it, but Sam was sure it would work and was bound to go through with it. And damned if it didn't work. I got to hand it to him and that smart little gal of yours. They cooked the whole thing up between them."

"What things?" Red demanded. He grabbed Waltermen's arm. "Cooked what up?"

"That note," Waltermen gasped out between spasms of laughter. "You crazy kid, Janie and Sam went out of their way to get you riled up. It was all a phoney. They planned it that way, to get you mad and make you swing at Sam. He figured you'd hurt your hand. He figured that way, we'd be sure you wouldn't lose your

head in the race and try to hold the colt back for the stretch run. And damned if it didn't work."

Red got it, then. Slowly, the whole idea filtered into his puzzled brain, and then exploded there. He felt the cords in his neck swelling then, the familiar throbbing of anger at his temples. He felt his face and neck getting red. He grabbed the front of Alec Waltermen's shirt, pulled back his other fist. His lips stuck out and his eyes were like blue fire coals.

"Why you—" he began. "I ought to clean up oin the whole bunch of you, pulling a lowdown trick like that. I'm going to—"

Somebody touched his arm and a girl's voice said, gently: "Uh-uh, Red! Get hold of that temper. You said you were going to hold tight rein on it from now on, remember?"

Slowly he dropped his balled fist and let go of Waltermen's shirt front. The color faded from his face and the beating of anger at his temples subsided. He just stood there, looking at the cool, smiling dark loveliness of Jane Frazier. Slowly a smile broke out on his thin, wan face.

"Yeah. Yeah," he said. "That's right, honey. I—I think I got it pulled-up, now." He swung around and took her arm. "Let's go find that screwball brother of mine. I got to shake the hand of a guy with a jaw hard enough to break my fist—especially when he's a smart enough rooster to cook up a deal like that, to help a dumb punk win a race—in spite of himself."

Jane Frazier just smiled and held onto his arm tight. Alec Waltermen watched them walk off, shaking his head, still chuckling a little and wishing wistfully that he was young again.

MAKE MINE A DOUBLE — KNOCKOUT

By NORMAN OBER

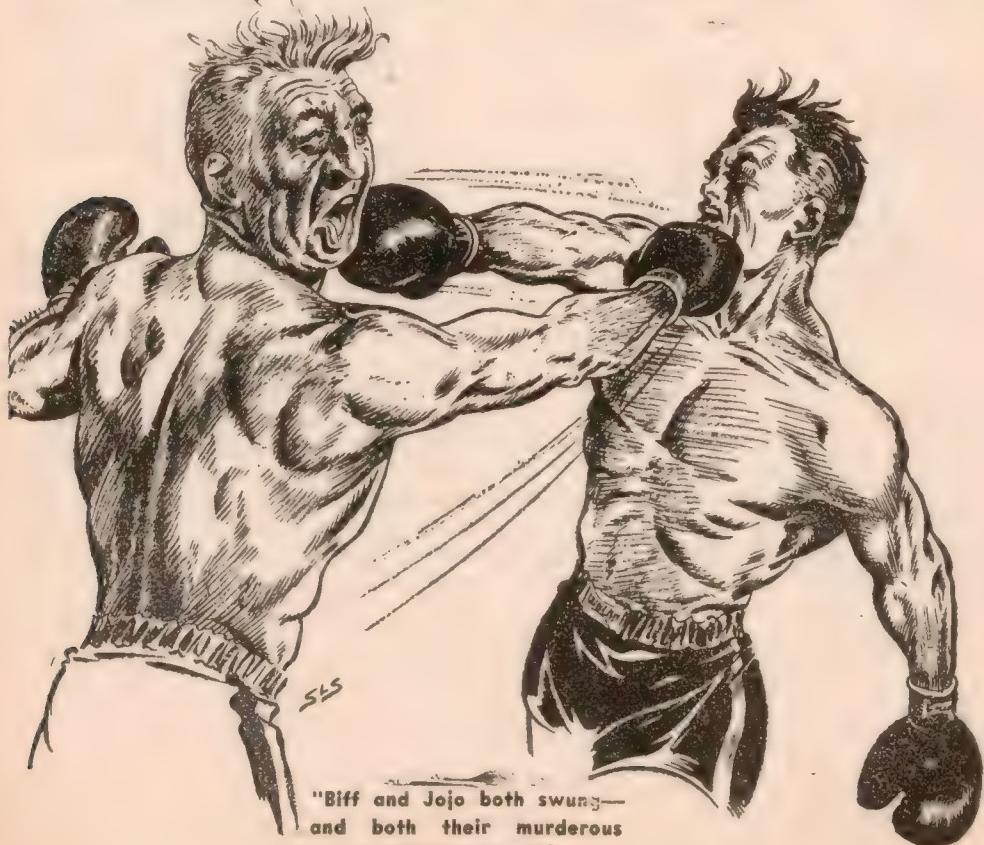
One or even two knockouts in the same go has been heard of—but, in this screwy slugfest there were four of 'em —plus a busted leg for the manager!

MY NAME IS Patsy Sullivan and I am resting comfortably, thank you, in the General Hospital. No, I do not know when I will be promoting my next fight since my sawbones assures me that, at my age, broken bones mend slowly. How do I come to be entombed in this very white bed inside this very white room? Whatsa matter, don't you read the sports page? All right, don't go away—I am lonesome

and it is a long time betwixt visitors. Siddown and I'll tell you how it happens that I the smartest boxing manager in the history of fisticuffs, find myself flat on my back this way. The rice on the floor? I'll get to that later. Here. Siddown. And be careful of that pulley. If it slips, my busted leg will crash down, cast and all—and that would cause me considerable grief.

My troubles start about six months ago. The fight game is becalmed—in a state of coma. As you know, there is no heavyweights in my stable. Until Joe Louis hangs up his gloves, I am off heavyweights because, at heart, I can't stand to send any boy of mine to his certain doom.

What I do have in my stable, though, is two tip-notch fighting men in the persons of Biff Mapes and Jojo McArgle. Ha! I see your eyes is lighting up! Relax, pal, the papers never got the whole story and I feel like talking.



As of six months ago, Biff Mapes is the lightweight title-holder and Jojo McArgle, my other boy, has the welterweight crown. This is a bad situation for any manager, having two titles in his bailiwick at once, no matter how good it looks from the outside. For one thing, there is no prospects anywhere on the horizon line for a match for either boy. Only bums and old men stumble in off the street asking for a match, but nobody the public would take serious. So we are a long time between purses, with our finances reflecting this situation. Without the public will take a match to its heart, there is no use trying to stage a bout, because empty seats don't pay the training expenses.

This is how things stand when I got my great inspiration. Listen, pal, if you ever get one of them things, the simple thing to do is buy a gun and shoot yourself dead. If I would of done that, believe me, I would not be in this horizontal state with a cast on my right arm and one on my left leg!

Anyhow, I am sitting in my office and looking very glum. Also in my office, looking just as glum, are my two boys, Jojo and Biff. When conditions are as they are, my boys make it a special point never to let me look glummer than them. Jojo, who is a big farm boy in spite of his welter title, suggest that we should look for some new blood.

BIFF GETS that dull, hopeless look that he always gets when anybody starts in to think. "New blood!" he says. "If only there was some new blood!" This is the kind of help he is always giving me in an emergency.

"New blood," I inform them, "takes a long time to build up. The public don't take to such things overnight. By the time we found anybody for either of you slobs, and by the time the public got interested, you would both be petrified statues outside of Stillwell's Gym!"

So we pass from the weighty subject of new blood to the metaphysical, hoping maybe there is a ghost or somebody that would like to bid for

either crown—if he can make weight, of course. I am just on the point of course. I am just on the point of visiting a spiritualist to ask for advice when I get this here idea. I jump out of my chair so sudden that both my boys is shocked into opening up their eyes and blinking at me.

"Boys!" I yell. "I got it! I tell you I got it! Why didn't one of you boneheads think of it before?"

Biff gets a defensive look on his face right away and starts to say, "But I was just comin' up with the same thing this very minute when—" I cut him dead with a glance. "You boys must fight each other!" I tell them. "A grudge fight! You must get mad and train off to even weight. Then you battle it out for the welter-weight-lightweight crown! The public is all steamed up and we cop a fortune!"

Right away, I see there is something wrong with this idea. My two boys are looking at me and shaking their noggins pityingly. "What's wrong with you monkeys?" I demand. "Here is our big chance! We gotta build it up like a grudge fight, don't you see?" They didn't.

Jojo has a sob in his throat when he speaks. "Patsy," he tells me, "you are a great manager, but you are maybe getting a little bit removed up inside your grey matter. I could never fight with my pal Biff, here!"

And Biff drops a tear and adds. "Nor I couldn't fight with my buddie Jojo!" He gives me an accusing look and adds some more. "You oughta know how we feel about each other, Patsy! Me and Jojo come up from the golden gloves together! We roomed together when you sent us out on the road—we ate together, trained each other and—!" Biff couldn't go on. His voice broke.

Jojo managed to chortle, "We are surprised at you, Patsy. You, our own boss that we love like a father, expectin' us to lift up a glove to one another!"

By this time, the two apes have got me slobbering, too. I pull out a handkerchief and dry my eyes. Then I gulp hard and apologize. "Boys," I tell them. "Maybe I am getting grey

hair on my grey matter, or else the owls just ain't makin' nests in my ears any more like they used to. Forget the whole thing. I am a fool even to think of it." Jojo and Biff get up and each one of them takes one of my hands. We have a good cry and by-and-by they troop out to eat.

When I am left alone, though, my mind goes right back to this idea of them fighting themselves. The way I talk myself into it, it is my responsibility to them to keep them eating regular, so the most humane thing I can do is to somehow make such a bout come off. This will not be easy, though. You can see they are as close as Siamese twins and they'd both sooner turn in their gloves than either one to lay a finger on the other. This is my fault for letting them get so clubby. But it is clear to me that my duty to them is to stop this glorious friendship in its tracks and start it going into reverse. Obviously, a grudge match between them is the only solution to our troubles.

I sit for a long time and go through my mental wastebasket for a solid scheme. Only the janitor must have emptied the darn thing just before I started through it. It was empty. No matter which direction I turned, I drew a blank. The more I thought, the more I realized that Jojo and Biff had something between them that no casual bystander could bust up. Finally dejected I went back to my hotel.

THIS WILL be hard to believe, but when I saw that pair of legs in the hotel lobby, I knew right away that my troubles was over. It came over me like a fever. At such times, a guy will forget what Emily Post says, even if he knows. I rushed right around the divans and confronted the upper portions of this pair of legs. It turned out right off that this was a well-balanced picture. The pins was no better than the rest of the woman. Here sat a knockout in my ring.

By the time I finish my appraisal, I realize my eyes is wild with more of this here inspiration and my jaw is hanging down like it broke loose

from its moorings. Also, this lovely girl is commencing to give me a very unpleasant look which seems to suggest that she don't enjoy strange men appreciating her appointments.

Almost before I know what I'm doing, I find myself sitting down next to her and putting a paw on her arm. Before she can holler for help, I say all in a rush, "Listen, girlie. Believe me, I am not a four-flushing masher but an honest fight promoter! If you wish, I will call over the house detective who is an intimate friend and he will bear this out!"

She opens her mouth to say something but it doesn't come to her at the moment what to say I notice she has pretty teeth, too. But I go right on talking. "Patsy Sullivan's my name," I tell her. "I manage two of the finest boys alive, but I have reached a crisis in their career that you can help me solve."

She gets her mouth working successfully this time and manages, "Listen, Mister—are you sure you're not a little nutty? Maybe you'd better call over the house detective. If you're on the level, somebody should introduce us!"

This touches me. I see this girl's got the stuff. Imagine that, a girl in this big city that demands an introduction before she will swap tonsil vibrations with a strange man—even an old harmless-looking character like me. I call over Pete Slade and he tells her right off that even if I am nutty, I am rendered harmless by the putting of one finger in either eye. This calms her down a little, but she still looks skeptical.

"I could use a good job," she admits. "Suppose you slow down and tell me what this is all about."

I want to tell her that a gorgeous little creature like her should not be working but should have some man looking after her every wishes. I don't say this, though, because I do not wish to bring back that suspicious look. Instead, I tell her very quick about Jojo and Biff and our fight problems. It turns out she is quite a fight fan herself back in Kansas City where she comes from. She knows all about my boys and the ti-

ties they hold. And she agrees that the present picture is very dismal indeed. If I am only twenty years younger, I would of proposed on the spot—but I am not so I didn't. Finally, we get down to my proposition.

BY THIS TIME, I know that her name is Dorothy Malone and that her pals call her Dottie. "Dottie," I tell her, "the only thing that is strong enough to save my boys from their mad devotion for each other is Daniel Cupid! That's where you come in!"

She is no dummy, this little queen. "You want me to make them jealous of each other, is that it?"

"That is roughly the whole setup and you are a very smart little filly to catch on so fast," I applaud her.

"If you think I can do it, I'm willing to try," she tells me. "I need the money. Still—aren't you afraid I'll hurt your boys?"

"Hurt Jojo and Biff?" I ask, hardly able to believe my ears. "I'm only afraid that they won't hurt each other in the fight! And that's why you gotta help me out. I'll arrange for you to meet them both to-morrow and you can start dishing out dates to them in turns. Get them steamed up and rivals for your favors. Before we know it, those two love birds will be at each other's throats. Then we can let slip you don't know which to choose and they'll be hot as roosters to square off and decide the issue in the ring. On the night of the fight, you can disappear. It's worth two grand to me if you put it over, one in advance and one the night of the bout. Whaddya say, Dottie?"

Her eyes go big and I can see she wants that dough bad. She thinks a few seconds and then smiles. "Suppose I can't make them fall for me?" she asks. "What then?"

I look her up and down and pat her little paw. "Dottie," I tell her, "I am a retired firehorse but I got a good memory. Jojo and Biff will take one glom at you and they will be smitten!" Then I get up and say. "If I am not past my prime and going downhill fast, I would never give either of those sadheads a chance

for you!" I sigh. "But that's the sorrowful part of being only young once!"

This makes her smile real sweet and she gets up and shakes hands with me. "It's a deal!" she says. "I'll get your boys to fight and the purse will make you all rich enough to retire. Then you can go downhill slowly, Patsy!" We make arrangements to meet in my office the next day before lunch and I go up to my room. I think later that I forgot to ask her where's she staying and what's she doing in my hotel lobby. But she is a grade A filly, little, blonde page boy locks—incidentally, I never could get that through my skull—why they call a girl's haircut a page boy! Well, whatsa difference. The next day she turns up in my office dressed fit to slaughter the opposition.

Jojo is slumped in his seat and Biff is doubled up in his. Both of them have their hats down over their eyes and their chairs are leaning against the wall at lopsided angles when Dottie walks in. There is nothing like the click of female heels to snap a man out of a daydream and my two prizes straighten up like someone set fire to their seats. When they see Dottie, their jaws drop at the same time like they'd been rehearsing it for weeks.

"Boys," I tell them, "meet Dottie Malone," and they bounce up like twin jack-in-the-boxes, bumping into each other and almost falling down trying to offer her a chair.

Dottie and I have to hide our grins as these two clown-clumps dust each other off and straighten their ties and try to look like desirable, fascinating matinee idols. Dottie thanks them both, gives Jojo a special smile and takes the chair he offers her. This makes Biff glower at Jojo and Jojo favor Biff with a philanthropic smile. They are a circus to watch, my two gangling clowns.

Dottie looks from Jojo to Biff and then back to Jojo, giving him another special smile that makes him swallow his windpipe. Then she turns to me. "So these are your two champions," she says. They preen them-

selves like two poodles at a dog show. "I always loved fighters. Why back home in Kansas City—."

THAT'S HOW it all starts. Dottie is terrific. She strikes those guys down like a cyclone and has them eating out of her little mitts in no time. She is good for them, too, because she is a smart little girl and knows something about the fight game. She gets them down to the gym regular and watches them work out. The glum sessions in my office drops right off them and they're in top fighting shape in a couple weeks. Stillwell's gets all hepped up over my boys trainin' like mad and this beautiful doll egging them on. Pretty soon the papers take it up and we've got the public wondering what's gonna be between these two old pallies and the Kansas City lulu. Up to this time, we have played our cards fast but cautious. There is no mention made at any time of a possible match and I do not let the boys work out with each other but get other sparrin' partners for them to kick around when they're showing off to Dottie they're killers.

All this time, Dottie is dating Biff one night and Jojo the next. And she's doing it nice. They don't stay out late, they don't overeat and they don't drink anything but proper liquids for training purposes. A month goes by and my boys are just beginning to get a little peevish with each other over Dottie. She didn't force the thing but just let it happen around her. I never needed to give her one minute's coaching in the whole time, that kid was so smart. The thing that made me wonder was that she really seemed to be having a swell time with both of the boys and still she was really double-crossing them both.

Finally, we decided it was time to pull off the big event. The boys were in Stillwell's, working out on the bags, jumping rope and all that, Dottie there in a slick little outfit that would have made a blind man jump through hoops for her. I walked in real unhappy from the time office

and shrugged for the boys to come over. "Lissen, kids, I can't get you no sparrin' partners. Why don't you jump into the ring and give each other an easy session. No rough stuff, of course. But just to keep yourselves in shape."

Dottie claps her hands real eager and says, "Oh, swell. Now I can see both my boys in the same ring." Right away, I see the same glint come into both their eyes. They put on their protective masks and hop into the ring. It doesn't take long for all the other boys, handlers and hangers-on to gather around and watch them go at it. We give 'em a bell and they both charge out like bulls, each one figuring to catch the other one off guard. They come together like two freight trains and start chucking leather into each other like machine guns going off. For two top performers, they look like palookas this time, standing toe to toe and hanging haymaker after haymaker into each other's frames.

EVERYBODY in the gym starts in to holler blue murder. Biff and Jojo is friends so long and everybody likes them so much that nobody know who to root for—so everybody just yells, not makin' much sense. The boys both of them stand the same way, neither one doing any footwork, ploughing into each other's faces and midriffs like piledrivers. Dottie and I exchange a quick wink that nobody notices for the excitement. Then I climb into the ring and get between them.

"Quit it!" I yell. "Whatsa matter with youse two guys?" Before I can get through to their foggy brains, they both hang a few on me. When I start to go down, they break real quick and dive for me. They grab me and start apologizing all over the place. Each one says it's his fault until they see I'm not going to collapse. Then they just back off and glare. The whole gym fall quiet as a grave, watching them.

Jojo snarls a second, then says, "I'm startin' in right now to take off weight!" He points a glove at his former pal. "And I'm gonna knock

him off for the lightweight crown!"

Biff lets go a vicious sneer. "Don't do me no favors!" he yaps. "I'm startin' in eatin' right now and puttin' on weight until I make welter. Then I'm gonna pin his ears back for the title!"

I put up a hand and sob out real sorrowful. "I never did figure to see this day come, when you two beloved bruisers would say a unkind thing to each other." Then I toss in, "If this is what you both want, it shouldn't be necessary for neither of you to go too far. I will consult the Boxing Commission and get a special ruling. You, Jojo, can take off a few pounds, and you, Biff, can put on a few. When there's only five pounds difference, you can fight it out for both titles." Then I sighed and added, "and I hope you both win!"

I tried to make them shake hands but they stood with arms folded, neither one willing to lay a glove next to the other. Dottie climbs into the ring and gets between them. "Now listen, you two!" she snaps out real sharp. "This is all my fault and don't think I don't know it. Now you two shake hands and make up right here and now or you'll never see me again!" Well, right away they both push paws at each other and shake real reluctantly.

"Don't go away, Dottie!" Jojo says. "If you walked outta my life, I'd just naturally shrivel up and die like an old potato!"

Not to be outtalked, Biff throws her a sad pair of eyes and puts in his two cents worth. "Dottie, if you left me now, I'd fling my achin' carcass into the East River and pull the water right over my head forever!"

Dottie burst into tears at this and I swear I don't know how she did it so real. She shoulda been an actress on the stage with talent like that. First she kissed one of them and then she kissed the other. And she put a paw into each one of their big mitts and told them between snifflies that she'd marry the one that won the big fight, since she couldn't really marry them both.

They both looked real determined and each one swore to win for Dottie.

The mob cheered and scattered to spread the glad tidings about the grudge fight with Dottie as first prize! It had all worked out just like I planned and I was happy as a lark.

After I started making training arrangements and got the Yankee Stadium for the go, I picked up the late papers and headed back to my hotel. Dottie was waitin' for me in the lobby. So we sat down and went over the papers one by one. The sports pages were full of details about the big grudge fight. Why, there was more than enough copy in this one day's sheets to cinch a good turnout. What with the capacity of the Stadium and the percentages set for me and the boys, I knew this one would land us in the high numbers on easy street for a refreshing long time!

WHEN WE finish reading the stories, I put down the papers and turn to Dottie. "Well, peaches," I tell her. "We're in! And the way you done this job, you can expect a bonus when we collect." Right away, though, I see it isn't okay with her. She busts out crying again and I realize this time that she wasn't faking in the ring with the boys. "What's wrong, baby?" I ask real gentle and very much disturbed by these waterworks.

"I feel terrible!" she says. "They're both such fine boys and—and I've made them hate each other. When they fight, they'll try to kill each other—and—and if Jojo gets hurt, I—!"

Well, I could understand her going soft that way because, like I said before, this little female article is strictly the heavy cream up on top of the milk! But when she come out with Jojo getting hurt that way, I felt like swooning. "Dottie?" I asked her. "Are you tryin' to tell me you fell for Jojo?"

She nodded her head miserable as can be and sobbed out, "Yes, Patsy, I love him so much it hurts me all over!" And then she burst into another fresh gale with heavy rain, louder than ever.

Pete Slade, the house detective came over very suspicious, but I

waved him off. "Honey," I said, "is this gonna affect your going through with our deal?"

She shook her head again—in the right direction, I was glad to see. "No," she sobbed out. "you three idiots wouldn't know how to make a living outside of the fight game and I know you need the money. Only I—I love Jojo so—I couldn't help it. You see I—!" She stopped real abruptly.

"You what?" I asked.

"I—nothing!" she gave me back. "Nothing!" Then she got up and dropped a whole new batch of tears over me. "Don't worry, Patsy, I won't let you down." And with that she turned and ran out to the street. I watched her go and felt my knees turn to water. I sat down again quick. Holy mackerel, with Dottie caught in Jojo's spell that way, anything could happen by fight time. I wondered what that stupid pug had that Biff didn't. To my way of thinking, they were equally undesirable as prospective husbands, but you can't tell it to a woman. Well, it'd happened and my only chance was that Dottie'd keep her word. Offhand, I sorta knew she would, but that didn't keep me from worrying. I wondered what it was she was going to tell me, then I shrugged it off.

HAVING BOTH the boys in my stable made training simple. We took one camp and set up two rings. This was a novelty and the press gave us plenty of space. And nobody thought the grudge was a fake, either. The public is very romantic and took the triangle to its heart. The battle was going to be a bonanza because, the way tickets were going, nobody seemed to be willing to sit home and listen to the fight over the radio.

We were a cinch to outdraw both the heavyweight tilts and the cops made very elaborate preparations to handle the mobs. The ducats were not priced too high and we knew pretty soon there was gonna be a sellout. If you've been inside the Yankee Stadium on a fight night, you'll know how many seats there are in the

joint and what that was gonna mean in gate receipts. Oh, yes, when I wasn't busy worrying about my fighters and Dottie, I was feeling mighty good the rest of the time.

We wound up training after both boys made their weights. They were in great condition, both of them. I tell you, this love thing, handled right, is the greatest thing in the world. There's nothing like it. Sure, I seen plenty of guys go gaga over a dame and wind up behind the eight ball or on the end of somebody's Sunday punch. But like I say, when you plan it right and use the institution the way I done, there's nothing like love to bring you home the pot at the end of the rainbow and all that.

Came the night of the fight. Didja see it? Well, everybody else did. That corner of the Bronx was just a crawling mass of humanity that night. You never saw so many people, even at a ball game this year—and we had some top figures, you'll remember. And when the SRO sign went up, I thought the fans turned away would demolish the Stadium on the spot. They wouldn't go home, so, at the last minute, somebody got the park speakers turned around and hooked 'em up to the broadcast system. The overflow just squattered all around and listened to the fight. Talk about gates, it was the biggest one in history. But I don't have to give you all that if you read about it in the papers.

It wasn't no time at all before the prelims were off the card and the final—the main event was ready to go.

My boys came out in their robes and it was just like in the gym. Nobody knew who to root for. The fans just cheered like mad and it was clear there was no favorite in the bout. Whoever won, it'd be okay with the public. Only these people were on hand because they'd never be able to confess to their grandchildren that they'd missed this one. Some of the fans seemed to have a preference, but most of them just gave 'em a hand when they climbed into the ring and sat back to wait for the payoff.

THE REFEREE gave 'em their instructions after the usual introduction over the loud speakers. Then they touched gloves and went to their corners to wait for the bell. I gave 'em both my blessing and picked out a spot halfway between two ringposts. I was gonna leave 'em both to their handlers during the bout. It wouldn't have been fair for me to rush back and forth tellin' each one how to kayakoe the other and I'd have looked like a monkey doing it.

The bell came and you know what happened. They came out like lightning and there was no science nor no skill in any of those fifteen bloody rounds. Don't ask me what kept 'em going. I don't know. Each time the bell let go, they'd come out again. There were hooks, jabs, crosses, sure. But there wasn't a single feint in the go. They didn't neither one waste a motion. And most of the wallops were those Sunday explosives, up from the knee-caps or coming around from the ring posts.

By the fourth round, neither one them could see what he was punching and the referee was knocked out, you'll remember, in the fifth. They held up the fight until he was revived and then went at it again. The ref was very careful to keep outa the way of those gloves after that, but those two goats couldn't either of 'em see what he was doing.

Talk about throwing in the towel, Dottie came up and begged me to do it, but they both promised to murder the guy who tried to stop 'em.

You never saw such punishment. The fans yelled until they didn't have strength left to yell. Then they looked on kinda weak and lots of them even yelled to throw in the towel. And brother, when a fan yells for that, you're seein' something! Anyhow, they kept going right through the fourteenth round that Way.

In the fifteenth round, you could see the judges were worried. There'd been a dozen attempts to call it off but the fighters went out and swung at space until they found each other.

Of course they'd bothed slowed to

a lame walk by the last round. They were punchy but still pitching leather at what they could find. It was pathetic. The fans were quiet as a grave, waiting for that final bell. Everybody was worn out emotionally as the fighters were physically. People were just hanging on to their seats, some of 'em tryin' to keep from being sick at the sight of those mauled mugs. Then it happened. You'd have to have seen it to believe it, but I'll describe it because, brother, I was there, with my nose practically on the doggone edge of the canvas.

"This is for Dottie!" Jojo says and winds up a wallop from off the deck.

"You mean *this* is for Dottie!" shreiks Biff, blind as a bat. And he winds up a holiday haymaker like he was the hand of a clock gone berserk! Well, they neither one can see because their lids is swollen tight, so they don't know where they're punchin' unless they do it by hidden radar in their trunks! And they're both of them too blind to dodge—so the miracle happens, with maybe a minute or fifty seconds left to the final bell.

THAT'S RIGHT. Both them murderous punches landed and both them glorious, gory lotharios went down together just like it was rehearsed. The mob went mad and the boys were carried out. Neither one of them came to until the next morning in this here hospital. And when they found each other side by side, beds right next to each other in the same private room—this room, by the way—they lunged for each other and had to be restrained by straitjackets. It was a terrible finish for their friendship and only the size of the pot made me feel at all able to face 'em.

But I did. I floats in after their last fracas with flowers and a box of chocolates which they can eat now that training's over. I smiles a smile from ear to ear at them but I see they're lying there dejected in the middle of their collections of bruises. Each one can see the job he did on the other guy, but even that don't

make them feel right.

"You guys aren't sittin' there moping about Dottie?" I demanded. "You ain't that dumb!?"

I look from one to the other. "Dottie," I announce real solemnly, "has fled town with a traveling man. She told me to say she disapproves of fighting in principle and youse two guys in particular!" This, I figure, is the quickest way to make them pals again which I must do even though the press is clamoring for a return match. For I will not ever more allow those two gallots to square off against each other again. It would be disaster. No, in spite of the possible added revenue, I cannot countenance such a thing. They must be friends from n—

Just as I am thinking these noble thoughts, the door busts open and Dottie comes in. Did I say Dottie? She is followed by another Dottie! That's right. Two Dotties comes in. One flings herself onto Jojo and the other one chucks herself on top of Biff. And those two morons, being helpless from the straitjackets, go down in a paix of heaps in their beds.

By this time, I am wondering whether or not to call for one more straitjacket and join the boys. They are looking just as bewildered and I finally manage to ask, "What's the pitch, here? Who's who and what's what?"

WITH THIS, the two Dotties stop sniffling and bust out smiling and then laughing. We are laughing, too, in another few seconds, only we don't know at what. Finally, the Dottie that's sprawled all over Jojo controls herself and says, "I'm Dottie, don't you see?"

"Sure I see!" I gurgle. "But so's she!" And I points to the mirage that's draped all over Biff.

"No!" they both shriek as soon as they can get through their laughing. And Jojo's Dottie says, "She's Lottie! I'm Dottie!"

By this time I'm sure I'm dotty myself! But Jojo's Dottie finally makes it clear. "I'm sorry, Patsy!" she says. "But it happened like this. We're twin sisters and we decided to

divide up your assignment. I took Jojo and Lottie went out on the nights with Biff's dates. That kept both of them thinking we were only one girl while we really were two! It was lots of fun at first, but I fell in love with Jojo and Lottie fell in love with Biff. That's—that's what I tried to tell you in the hotel—only I didn't know how to explain!"

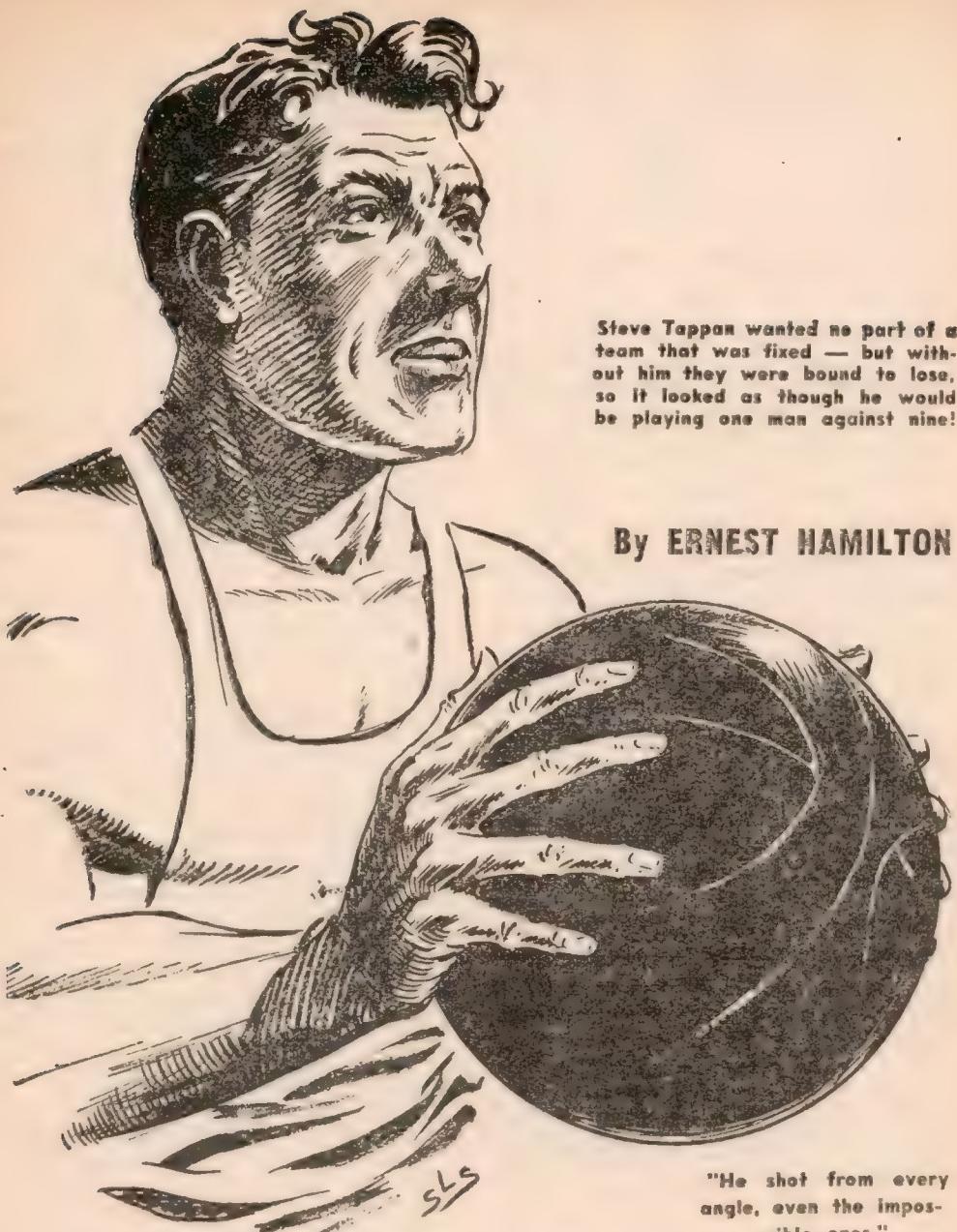
Biff and Jojo has taken all this in with many exchanges of queer looks and unbelieveaments! Finally, they get to the point. "Look," says Jojo in a strange, choked voice. "We ain't gonna fight with each other any more. Take these bodyholders offa us!"

I get a nurse to get the straitjacket offa the boys—and they quick go into a clinch with their girls. All of a sudden, their skies are clear. Each one of them has a twin. It takes Biff a few minutes to get used to calling Lottie Lottie instead of Dottie, but you could see right off they were both satisfied there was two and that they were gonna be pals again.

They were mooching and loving around and then all of a sudden they weren't. They were lookin' at me—not at the girls, mind you—me! Jojo says, kind of odd, "So Patsy hired you girls to make us sore at each other, huh?"

And Biff adds, "He made two best friends lift up their hands to each other in malice aforethought!" And before I could move or call for help, they were both outa bed and workng over my brittle system! The girls shriek for them to spare me, I really meant well, so they decide coolly not to kill me outright. And as a special consideration to the girls, they pick me up and put me in Jojo's bed when they are finshed wth me.

But to show me they are not really mad and there's no hard feelings, the next day they have the double wedding right here in this hospital room with me flat on my back as best man. That's how come the rice on the floor, you see. And that's how come I'm impatient to get outa here, because my boys are anxious I should make them some more matches—only not with each other.



Steve Tappan wanted no part of a team that was fixed — but without him they were bound to lose, so it looked as though he would be playing one man against nine!

By ERNEST HAMILTON

"He shot from every angle, even the impossible ones."

FIVE MEN DON'T MAKE A TEAM

STEVE TAPPAN stood in the clear with his bare hands hanging down, large as life and twice as eager. He watched the Dolphins' left guard, Pete Andersen, pivot on the hardwood away from the opening through which he could have passed

the ball to the hoop through Steve's hands. A second later, a bounce pass from Pete to Center Corky Kuttner was intercepted by the enemy Bats' right forward, and both teams were maneuvering for position in the Dolphin's rear court.

Steve didn't have time to wonder what was wrong with Pete. He saw the rest of the Dolphins line up for a set defense, and he knew it was all wrong. Corrigan, the Bats' lanky forward, had pushed the ball to his center, and then dropped back. The leather was travelling down, in short frequent passes, to just below the backboard, but Tappan had his eyes on Corrigan. He knew his play from the days when he and the lean Irishman had played together in school.

When an overhead pass from the Bats' right guard flashed the ball out of the tangle of arms and legs under the basket, Steve was in there waiting for it. Corrigan was supposed to make a long shot from the clear, in back of the rough play, but Steve was there to make a leap for the ball, halfway over, and bat it down with a stringy arm.

A pivot feint confused Corrigan, and left Tappan with an open stretch of hardwood for a dribble into front court, and an unmolested try at the hoop. By the time the Bats woke up to the fact that only four of the Dolphins had been set in the defense, the leather was dropping prettily through the cords.

Corrigan took it out, and went around Andersen with a neat curve to the Bats' other forward. Johnny Swilenski, the Dolphins' right guard, stole it on another attempted pass, and Steve dashed under the bucket to take a pass from Swilenski. This time his guard seemed to be stuck to him like fly paper, and the Dolphin guard passed to Kuttner, who took it high and sent it overhead to Andersen.

Tappan's guard let loose just long enough for Pete to send the ball to Steve. Happy Hale, the Dolphins' other forward, was tied up in a tangle of arms and legs on the other side of the court. But once more Andersen let Steve's waiting arms wait, pivoted, dribbled back fast, and turned to take a long try himself.

The ball rolled around the hoop, and slipped back to bounce off the backboard. Tappan got it on the rebound, but so did his guard. It was

jump ball on the free throw line.

Steve made his tap good, and Kuttner caught it, to whirl, and score two points through the cords before anyone could get near him. The half ended, 19-18 for the Bats.

IN THE dressing room, Steve sank onto a bench next to big Johnny Swilenski.

"What's wrong with Pete tonight?" he asked.

"Nothing's wrong with him." Swilenski turned to stare in surprise. "He's playin' nice ball. You too," Johnny added after a minute.

"Three times I was in the clear," Tappan said, "And Andersen horsed around instead of slipping me the leather."

"Oh that. Look, Tap," Johnny mumbled. "Just ferget it. Let it ride. It ain't serious. We can't win this one anyhow."

"So we lie down and quit?"

"Nope." The big guard was looking at Steve in puzzlement. "We just play the best ball we can. So do you. An' don't worry yourself about Pete. That'll straighten out."

Steve went up for the second half, thinking it was fine to tell him not to worry about it. But it would be a lot finer if he had a team to play with. The others were doing it, too. Not the way Pete did, even when there was no other place to go with the ball, but any time there was a choice to make, Tappan was left standing there, not holding the ball.

The Bats had caught wise, too, and they began playing all five of their men against the other four Dolphins. The coach noticed it, too. The Bats were staying so far away from Steve he never even got a chance at free throw. You couldn't get fouled if you weren't in the game.

Four minutes of play brought the total screaming up to 25-21, and when the Bats scored again within the next thirty seconds, Dolphin Coach Harry Carney called time out for a substitution. Tappan saw his sub come on the court, and strolled off with mixed feelings of relief and anger.

The relief turned quickly enough

to a seething fury. From the bench, he watched the team start clicking. With another man in his place, the Dolphins had a quintet again, Andersen took the ball out behind the Bats' endline, and pushed it to Swilenski after a successful feint to Kuttner. The guard dribbled to the front court, passed to Si Molan, the sub right forward. Molan arched it to Kuttner, down in the righthand corner, and the center shot it back to Happy Hale in the bucket. The left forward leaped into the air as two Bats came up out of nowhere to block the throw, and made a one-handed toss straight through the cords.

Molan couldn't stop the Bat guard from throwing the ball in to Corrigan, but Andersen stole it from the enemy forward before it left the Dolphins' court. A swift pivot-and-pass brought it back to Molan, still on the endliness. The sub made a nice try from coffin corner, but not quite nice enough. The leather slipped off the side rim of the hoop, to be picked up Kuttner, ready and waiting right underneath, and tapped to Happy Hale for a clean toss through the cords. Two balls in as many minutes from a team hadn't been able to click all evening!

It kept going that way. The Dolphins couldn't beat the Bats, but they did. The final quarter ended on 47-44 for the Dolphins. It was almost as if the other four men had gotten together to prove they could play the game without Tap Tappan, and couldn't play it with him.

STEVE WENT down to the dressing room by himself, and got into his street-clothes as fast as he could, without talking to anyone. He got out of the lockers quietly, by himself, and drifted along outside with the last strugglers from the game crowd.

It wasn't the first time he'd heard fans talking about him, and he knew what to expect.

"What was Tappan trying to do anyhow? Throw the game?"

"A-a-h, yer nuts, Andersen shoved him out of it."

"I still think Tappan ain't straight."

"Carney was crazy to hire him. Nobody believes that phoney evidence. He was in it as much as the rest of them."

"Tap's OK. I don't care what you say, he's OK."

It had been that way since the betting bombshell broke a year ago, in the middle of his senior year at college. Steve wasn't involved, but all the other members of his quintet were. By the time he was cleared, his name had been dragged through the muddiest columns in town. And plenty of people still thought he'd gotten away with something. The ones who stuck were loyal, but there weren't many who did.

Every game he'd played since then, there'd been somebody around to say he wasn't trying, that he was playing for betting points instead of baskets. And walking along with the crowd now, he realized how this exhibition had looked from the grandstand. Tappan stood around the court, and tried so hard to do nothing that the Bats finally started pretending he wasn't there. Then Carney let them stop pretending by really taking him out. There was plenty you couldn't see from the stands.

Tap stopped and lit a cigarette, and stood there smoking, letting the last of the paying customers drop their remarks in his lap as they went by. So this was his first pro game! The big lights and the big money! If he didn't have a season contract, Steve realized, it would probably be his last game, too.

He was still standing there, alone in the litter of programs and popcorn boxes, when Johnny Swilenski came swinging by. The burly guard almost passed him in the dark, but saw who it was, just as he was about to go on, and stopped.

"Hey, Tap!"

Steve came out his blue fog, and mumbled a reply. He didn't much want to talk to anyone on the team.

"C'mon an' have some coffee," Johnny said. The big man took his arm, and almost dragged him along forcibly, as Tappan tried to refuse. "Do you good," he went on cheerfully. "You got the blues."

"I got more than that," Steve retorted. "I got a new job to look for."

"It ain't that bad," Johnny protested. "Mebbe the boys jus' wanna to see what you can do. We been playin' together a long time, son. Five years since we started under Will Kennedy, an' five years is a long time to get used to each other."

"They know what I can do," Steve told him. "They all saw me when I was playing for State. And if I was good enough for Carney, in spite of the stink and everything else, I ought to be good enough for them."

SWILENSKI propelled him through the plate-glass door of an all-night hamgurger joint, and waited to answer until they had two cups of steaming java to talk over.

"Sure," the big man said finally. "Only it ain't what they know, it's what they feel. Now if it had been Kennedy hired you, mebbe it would different. But Carney oney took us over this year. We don't know him too good either. He's big time, sure, an' we got to get to play two games in the Garden. It's worth it. But you can see the boys'll go easy, till they get the feel of you."

Steve thought that over. It still didn't make sense. They'd practiced with him and they'd seen him play. And they knew he couldn't afford to look bad to the public, not after last year's scandal. But there was no sense arguing it. Johnny, at least, was on his side. He'd have to figure out the rest some other time. Tiredness hit him all of a sudden, after the nervousness and the fury of his first night at play-for-pay. He took a cab back to the hotel with Swilenski, and went to bed without thinking any more. Plenty of time to get it straightened out later...

They left for St. Louis the next day, and on the plane, there wasn't a trace of unfriendliness. Andersen slept all the way, and the others acted just as they had since training began. Whatever it was they had against him on the court, it wasn't personal.

It was the same way in pre-game practice, all except for Andersen. Pete didn't give Tappan the leper-

treatment in practice the way he had in the game, but he wasn't too anxious to play ball with the new forward either. They lined up on opposite sides for practice game, and Andersen came to guard Steve with a light in his eye. He really did it too. It took every bit of skill Steve had developed in nine years of basketball to get around Pete Andersen that afternoon.

Tappan took it and grinned. The others, regulars and subs both, were playing the game with him. When he could get clear of Andersen; he pulled out everything in his repertoire, including a long shot from the rear court that brought both teams up cheering when the leather dropped smoothly through the cords.

By the time they were done, Steve had that old feeling back, the special feeling that comes when you're good and you know it, and everyone else knows it, too. Even Andersen's hostility couldn't bother him at that point. Pete had been one of the demigods, when he started playing as a freshman in high school, and it hurt to have one of the basket-ball greats acting like he had a bad case of measles. But whatever was eating Pete, Steve was sure now it wasn't his own playing that was at fault. He could afford to forget it, and wait and see what happened in the next game.

They were playing the St. Louis Swallows the next evening, and nobody expected to have any trouble. The Swallows were probably the weakest team in the Association, and the Dolphins were championship contenders. Steve dressed for the game feeling easy. Here was their chance to try him out under fire, if that was what they wanted. They wouldn't be risking anything. They could walk away from the Swallows, no matter how badly he did.

But by the time he got to the bench, Steve's confidence had taken a headlong dive into deep waters. On the steps, on the way up to the court he passed Harry Carney and Pete Andersen deep in conversation. He went by quickly, and neither of them seemed to notice him. On the way by, he caught only a couple of sentences

....but that was enough.

"Sure, I know what the official points are," Pete was saying as Steve moved up, "but what's the smart money betting?"

There was a mumbled answer from Carney, not loud enough for Tappan to hear, and then Pete again: "Awful low, isn't it?"

"That's your fault," the coach started to say, and then Steve was out of earshot.

SITTING on the bench, Steve let it sink in, and a couple of pieces of his own personal jigsaw puzzle fell into place. It looked like it wasn't going to be a pretty picture when it was all done.

Steve knew Carney's reputation as well as everybody else did. He was a smart basketball man, but he'd been in pro's when they couldn't run straight and show a profit. He'd built himself up slowly, so when the Association blossomed out after the war, he was ready to step in as owner-manager-coach of a top team. He'd bought out Will Kennedy's interest in the old Dolphins, got them a shiny new court of their own, and shiny new uniforms, and as far as anyone knew, he'd been on the up and up since then.

But that wasn't how the conversation on the stairs sounded. And that conversation made too much sense. It explained too much of what had been going on between Andersen and himself, too. The general public might still suspect Tap of being guilty in the college scandal. But the men who were on the inside of the betting rings knew better. The only puzzler was, why had Carney hired him in the first place? Figured he was ripe, maybe? Or got the wrong info about him, and found out too late?

Steve started the game with more than Pete Andersen's unfriendliness to bother him. He was trying to watch everybody else and play his own game at the same time. Pete had said the point margin was low. That meant they were going to win by less than they ought to...if the smart money was right, and if it wasn't going to be right, it wouldn't be called smart.

Steve wanted to find out who pulled the score down.

Kuttner got first tap in at the center jump, and the ball flew easily into Happy Hale's outstretched arms. Hale pivoted and pushed it at Swilenski, who had a clear field for a dribble into the Dolphins' front court. Kuttner was in position waiting for it in mid-court, and the passes went easily back and forth down toward the basket, where Hale recovered the leather from Andersen, and started the game with an easy two points in the opening minute.

It was fast, clean, ball-playing, and they kept it up, the four veterans playing together like one man to build up a score of 8-2 in the first part of the quarter. Hale and Kuttner divided the score between them, 6 for the forward and 2 for the center. Steve didn't get near the hoop, but all the plays they used in the opening were down-the-line passes to one of the other men under the basket. It was too soon to tell if he was going to be cut out again. As for the rest of the men, there wasn't one of them who could be fingered for sitting back on the job. Steve waited and watched when he could, in between watching the ball.

HE BEGAN to get a hunch of how it would work when Andersen, in an excess of zeal, hoisted the Swallows to four points on a double free throw charged against him for holding. Kuttner latched on to the rebound, but lost the ball on an attempted pass to Swilenski. The Swallows on Swilenski, who picked up the leather, made a swift one-handed try for score. The Dolphin center leaped for it, but just a shade too late. The rooters for the home team were on their feet as the scoreboard flashed 8-6.

Tap took the ball out, and tossed a high one to Kuttner, who bounced it to Hale. From there, the leather steamed down the court between the Dolphin quintet, until Andersen had it in the bucket, with half the Swallow five converging on him.

Steve raced around to the inside right, where there was a small open-

ing, and yelled to Pete.
"Over here!"

Andersen gave him a swift look, turned away, and attempted a high overhead to Kuttner on the other side. The Swallow center stopped it, and dribbled back fast to the other next court, to make a try and a close miss. Swilenski picked it up on the rebound, and risked a long pass to Tap, almost half-way down court, as usual in the clear. The Swallows had already decided they could give him the same treatment the Bats had.

Tappan took it for a dribble to the Dolphins' court and shot it out to Kuttner, who was hugging the basket. The leather dropped through to bring the score to an even 10.

Skidmore, the Swallow guard on Tap, took the ball out, and Steve stopped it on a high leap batting it down to where he thought Andersen was. But Pete and the Swallow forward he was attached to must have been doing a piece of foot-work because it landed exactly between them, to bring a second personal on Andersen for charging.

The Swallows made his point, and once again the unstoppable Kuttner got the rebound, and started the ball on the journey back to the other basket. Tap pushed the leather to Happy Hale just inside the front court, and then, sizing up the line-up raced around in back of the other forward to pick it up again. Hale took a quick look around and saw there was no other opening, then hesitated a fraction too long, trying to decide whether to pass to Tap, shouting for the ball in back of him. It was held ball and jump, six feet inside the red line.

Hale's guard had two inches on him, and Tap edged around to pick it up if he could when the Swallow slapped it. Tappan was mad. He was in a ball game, and bets or no bets, team or no team, he was going to play ball. The Swallow guard slapped the leather hard at his own center and it couldn't be intercepted. It couldn't be, but it was. Tap seemed to rise right off the ground and

stretch out into that ball, he wanted it so bad.

His recovery had enough shock value to give him a part of a second to pivot and dribble clear of the crowd. He saw Kuttner and the opposition center fighting for position in front of the basket, found Hale under heavy guard in the bucket, and the other four men all mixed up together in a mass of arms and legs.

THIS WAS one ball that wasn't going to be lost on a series of wrong passes. Steve set himself as he saw the Swallows breaking off from the big tangle to head for him, and shot a long perfect overhead. He heard the sigh come down from the grandstands as it dropped through the center without touching the sides.

Steve Tappan played out that half, putting every bit of skill and training he had into it. He had played well in tough games before. This wasn't a tough game, but he had never played so well in his life, and he knew it. He took the ball from every angle, when it was barely possible to get it, and when it was impossible. He shot from every part of the front court, and sent one long looping one-hander in from the back court that had the crowd on their feet yelling their lungs out. The fans had come to the root their home team, but when they saw that kind of ball, they didn't care who was playing it.

Neither did the Dolphins. The most determined quartet couldn't have stayed out against that kind of thing. Within two minutes after that first basket, Steve had the team playing with him. He knew it, and he got a bitter sort of pleasure out of it, because he knew it was the last time he was going to play with them. In the same instant that the old confidence had flooded him while the ball centered itself downwards through the cords, he had made his decision, and it was that decision that made him unbeatable now. This game, at least, the smart money would be wrong. After this, it would

be no concern of his.

After a while it stopped being a game and became an exhibition. The Swallows simply got lost in the shuffle. The half ended, with the scoreboards showing a spectacular 48-16.

In the dressing room, Steve didn't bother to get into his sweat shirt and trousers. He figured he was going to get a little hotter before he could get any cooler. He stood there stonily while the coach and the other players crowded around, grinning and smacking him on the back. Then Pete Andersen shouldered through with a smile stretched from ear to ear. It didn't make sense to Steve, but he'd done all his thinking already, and he didn't care what Pete was happy about now.

"Listen kid," Andersen began, "I owe you..."

"Let's forget about that end of it," Steve broke in. "It's what I owe you you that counts." Then he measured off, and took one long, beautiful, unexpected poke at Andersen's smiling face, that sent the other man crashing to the floor.

The guard scrambled to his feet, his arms already working, and then Steve saw Swilenski and Hale grab him, while he felt a man on each of his one biceps. From just behind him, to the right, where the coach was hanging on to his arm with all his might, Steve heard Harry Carney's bass voice boom out.

"What in high hell or heaven is going on here? You boys play ball for the first time, and now you want to fight! What have I got, a basketball team or a bunch of lousy amateur pugs?"

"I don't have to tell you," Steve snapped at him. "Or any of the rest of you either, I guess." His eyes lit on Johnny Swilenski, and he added, "except maybe you, Johnny; I don't know where you fit into this."

“WHAT are you shootin' off about?" Swilenski demanded. "Fit into what? Is there some-

thin' goin' on around here I don't know about?"

"I think there is, Johnny," Steve told him. "A little matter of betting the points, and then helping to fix them so that the bets come out right!" He pointed to Pete. "Andersen here was fixing it with Carney on the stairs this evening, and it just so happened I heard them. Well, I hope I spoiled your little game for you for one night, anyhow! Now, if you'll be kind enough to suspend me for fighting, coach..."

"Andersen was fixing what with me?" Carney roared. "Andersen was getting the bejesus from me for pulling us down with the handicappers by keeping you out of the game!"

"What?" It was Steve's turn to stare.

"That's right. Listen, kid, don't you think I got sense enough to keep my nose clean when I move into the big money? I watch those handicappers, because they know before I do how good my team is. And when they drop me, I hit at where I think the trouble is."

Steve tore his eyes from Carney's face, as a burst of laughter hit him. Pete Andersen, his jaw already swelling from Tappan's punch, had his head thrown back in a rolling guffaw.

"And I thought you were crooked," he got out, between laughs. "We've all been going around here thinking the other guy was trying to lose the game. When you started really playing this game, I knew I was wrong, but until then..."

"He wasn't sure of Harry Carney here," Swilenski broke in to explain for him, "and when Harry hired you, after the scandal he was sure you was in somethin' together. An'..."

"Of all th' dam-fool ball-players I ever had to put up with, you spotlight heroes sure take the cake!" It was Carney, roaring over Johnny's apologetic voice. "Now get up there an' show me how to play basketball."

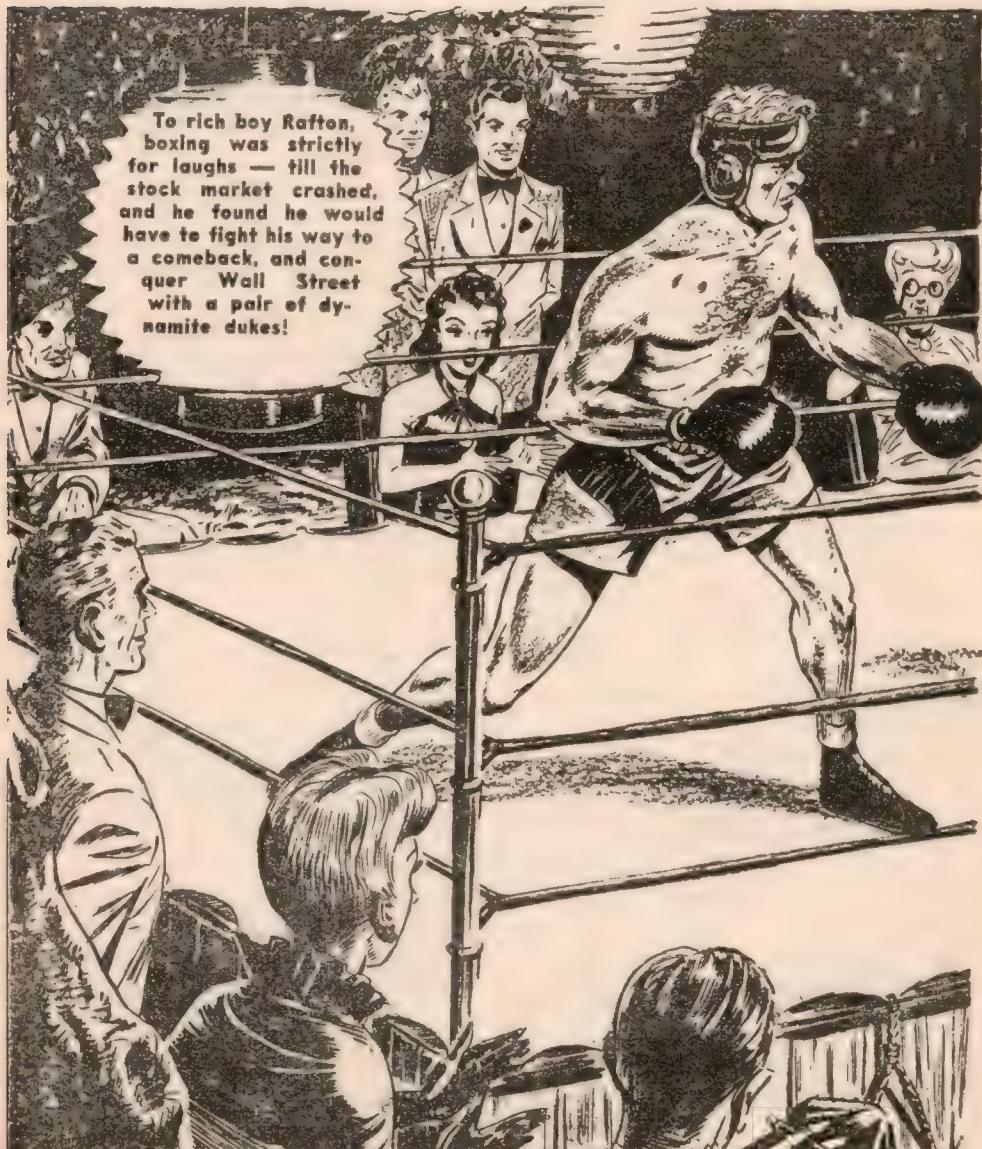
They did.

Fortune *in his* FISTS

By BILL HEUMAN

THERE WERE colored lanterns strung around the ring, and they were serving cold drinks between rounds. The ring posts and the canvas floor had been set up on the spacious Rafton lawn, adjoining the luxurious Rafton, topaz-colored swimming pool.

Herb Rafton, son of J. C. Rafton, Wall Street financier, sat on the little white stool in the corner while his valet wiped his perspiring face with a towel.



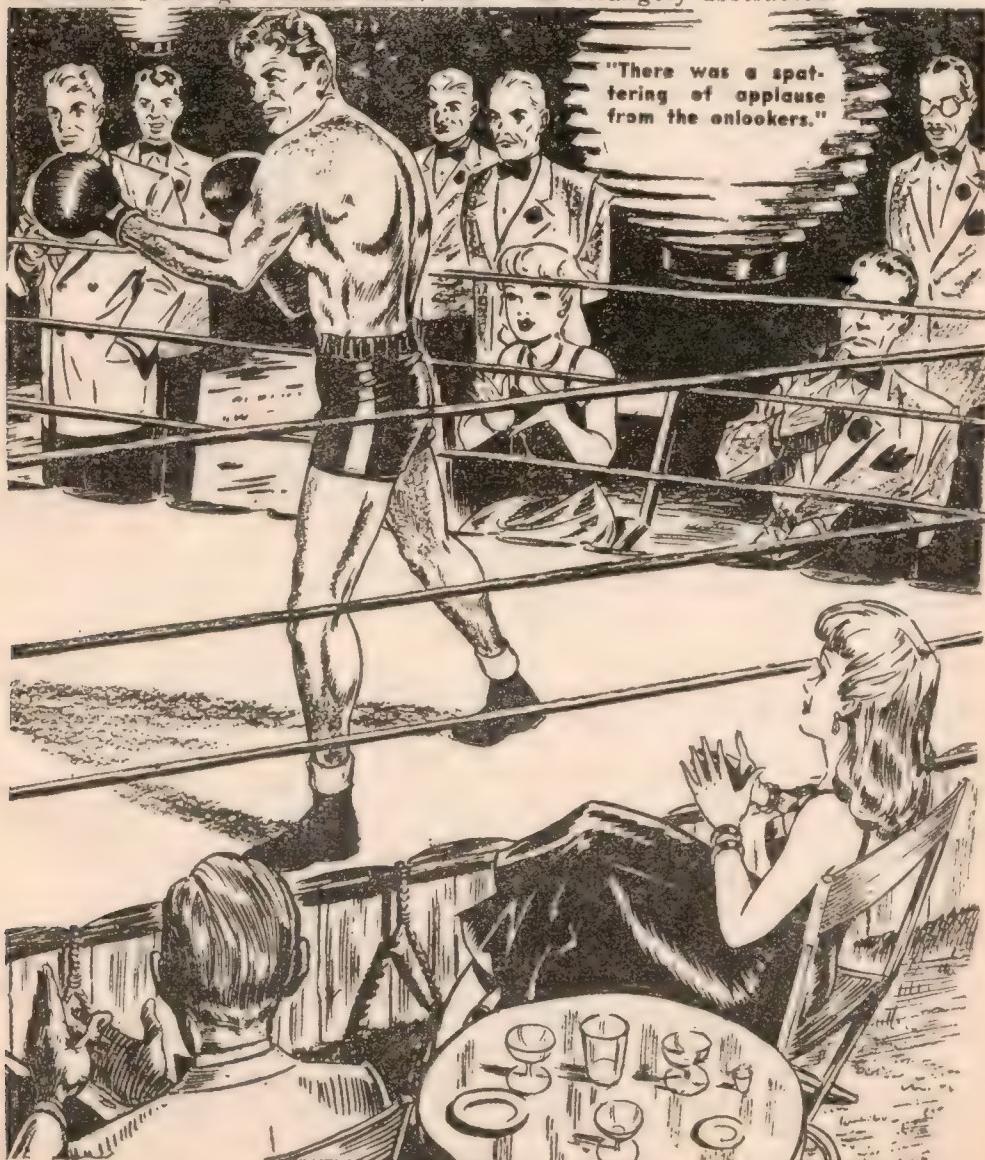
GREAT BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF A FABULOUS FIGHTER WHOSE

It was very hot for June—even too hot for an exhibition bout at a Rafton party. Herb stretched out his legs and grinned across the ring at the pro they'd sent up from the gym. They had two rounds to go in the six round sparring match, and Herb still felt very strong.

"He has a good left hand," Herb commented. He straightened up in the corner, a tall, sandy-haired young man with a pair of blue-gray eyes. He had his father's straight Roman nose, and

the same peculiar little smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

J. C. Rafton sat in a wicker chair a few yards away, tall as his hundred and seventy pound son, but not as heavy in the shoulders. Once or twice during the first four rounds. Herb had glanced at his father when he thought the older man wasn't looking at him. Ordinarily, J. C., loved these exhibition bouts which he arranged for the benefit of his guests, but tonight he was strangely abstracted.



DYNAMITE FISTS WERE A MATCH FOR WALL STREET'S POWER!

"Dad all right?" Herb asked Smith, the valet. Smith had been with the family since Herb was a boy. He was a short, roly-poly man with an almost bald head, and a pair of quiet blue eyes.

"Mr. Rafton has not been too cheerful tonight," Smith murmured. "Seems to have something on his mind, Herbie."

Herb Rafton nodded. He'd noticed that lawyer, Conway Evans, the big financier's attorney was at the party, and Evans usually preceded trouble.

The slight, blond-haired, Tommy Cole, Herb's room-mate at State, clanged the bell in the corner. Cole, since graduation, had been a house guest.

"Knock his block off, mister," Cole yelled as the pro, a veteran fighter, dark-haired, square-jawed, moved out of his corner.

Herb grinned, and then led with a short left. Cole always rode him in college. He was from the Westchester "Coles,"—if anything—wealthier than the Raftons.

The pro feinted with his left shoulder and then threw a short right to the body. Herb jabbed him with a left and danced away. He was the younger man by at least ten years, and the veteran pro couldn't keep up with him.

Several times Herb had noticed the man pulling his punches and it annoyed him. He knew J. C. Rafton was paying for an exhibition bout, as entertainment for his house guests, and that he did not want a slugging match on his front lawn, but it was galling to know that the other man in the ring wasn't trying too hard.

"Don't be afraid to open up," Herb told the man on one occasion. "If you hurt me, I'll hold myself responsible."

TH E PRO NODDED, approval written in his gray eyes. "You're all right, kid," he murmured, "but if I could hit I wouldn't be here picking up fifty bucks for a night's work."

Looking over the pro's shoulder in a clinch, Herb got another glimpse of his father's face, noticing the color of his skin and the haggard look in his eyes. Mentally, he was resolved to

speak with J. C. after the match.

The pro shuffled in, hooking a left for the body which Herb partially blocked. He threw a short right, and Herb Rafton cleverly went under the punch, slamming home his own left to the ribs in return.

There was a smattering of applause from the fifty odd people seated around on the lawn. Herb looked into June Crowley's violet eyes and grinned. They were engaged, with the wedding to come off as soon as Herb was located in his father's brokerage office.

A waiter passed by with a tray of glasses, and Miss Crowley reached out for a glass. She was tall, blond-haired, and cool. Herb had known her in prep school and at State. She was distinctly his type—from his own set. The Crowley's had an estate up along the Hudson.

The pro was talking again in another clinch.

"You do pretty well, kid," he murmured. "Intercollegiate boxer?"

"That's right," Herb smiled. "What's your name, Johnny?"

"That's it," the pro chuckled. "Johnny Graham."

The referee, Sam Carter, a friend of J. C. Rafton's, broke them, and then Herb stepped in very fast with a left jab. He jabbed twice to Graham's nose, not seeing the pro's right coming up toward his jaw.

He did hear a man yell, "Hey!" The voice was not from his crowd because they didn't use that expression.

Johnny Graham held up the punch pulled it slightly, so there was little shock when it landed against Herb's jaw.

"I don't want you to pull them," Herb muttered. "Let me have it."

"It's not that," Graham said quietly. "My hands are brittle, and I have to fight again in a week. I don't want any broken knuckles."

"Ooh," Herb murmured. He glanced in the direction from which the voice had come. Several of his set were looking in that direction also, slightly amused.

There were two people standing under the trees in the shadows off to the right of the ring, and quite a distance

away. A branch moved, and light from one of the lanterns glanced for a brief moment across the face of the shorter of the two spectators.

Herb Rafton blinked. The face was that of a girl—young, dark-haired. He could not make out the color of her eyes, but he could see the coldness in her features—the intense dislike she had for him, and for his old set. She was not one of his crowd because he knew all the people present; they'd been out before to J. C. Rafton's numerous lawn parties.

Johnny Graham, the pro, saw the surprise in Herb's eyes, and he noticed the direction in which the rich man's son was looking.

"Look," the older man muttered. "I'm sorry, kid, but my sister and dad came along tonight. They usually come out to my fights. I'm paying their fare back to New York so it won't go on the bill."

Herb nodded. "Why didn't you ask them to sit down?" he said. "This is a party."

Again, Graham blinked at him. "We're not the social set," he smiled. "We're the Grahams from Second Avenue."

"They must have pretty decent people on Second Avenue," Herb told him.

WHEN THE bell rang and they went back to their corners, Herb spoke hastily to Smith, the valet. The fat man signaled to one of the waiters and whispered in his ear.

Herb watched the waiter walk back to where Johnny Graham's folks were standing. He had a tray in his hands and drinks on it. An invitation to sit down went with the drinks.

The waiter walked away after a moment, but the two were still standing under the trees. Neither one of them had taken a glass from the tray. Graham had seen the gesture also and he nodded his thanks to Herb from across the ring.

"They bashful?" Herb asked when he walked out to the center of the ring for the last round of the exhibition.

Graham shook his head. "They're like me," he grinned. "We know we

don't belong here."

"Nonsense," Herb said. "Right now you're as important to this party as I am." He grinned. "I'd look awful silly out here, shadow-boxing."

"It sounds nice," Graham told him. "For a rich guy you're all right, kid."

They had a fast session with Graham putting on the pressure at Herb's request. It was clean, fast boxing, with honors about even when the final bell rang.

Herb held out his hand and walked over to Graham's corner with him. He watched the older man slip on a faded blue robe. There was a white four-leaf clover stitched on the back of it.

"Bring you luck?" Herb asked, pointing a glove at the clover.

Graham smiled wryly. "Not too much," he said. "I broke both hands in a motorcycle accident eight years ago; they've never been the same since." He paused. "In the pro ring, Mr. Rafton, you need good hands."

Herb stared at his own gloves, a small smile on his face. "I have the hands," he stated, "but I don't believe I'll need them in my profession."

"That's the way it goes," Johnny Graham chuckled. "What you don't need you generally have plenty of."

Herb watched the pro fighter slip through the ropes and walk toward the trees. A moment later the three went down the gravel path toward the garden house where Graham had dressed. The fighter's arm was around his sister's shoulder.

CHAPTER II

MIghty nice chap, Herbie," Smith, the valet commented. Herb had always insisted that Smith, who was old enough to be his father, call him by his first name.

Tommy Cole came over with Herb's spotless white robe and threw it across his shoulders.

"The pride of State," the young socialite grinned. "When are you going to grow up, kid, and start making millions like your dad—and my dad?"

"There's time," Herb said slowly. Once again the thought came to him

that he wasn't going to particularly like going into the brokerage office. Selling stocks and bonds didn't appeal to him. The business world—the world of high finance was for other men—fellows like young Tommy Cole—who would slide right into their dad's shoes. A man had to like what he was doing in order to make a success out of it.

"I start in two weeks," Tommy told him. "Dad wants me to begin at the bottom and learn the business before he puts me in any kind of position."

"A good idea," Herb agreed. He saw his father talking with Conway Evans, the lawyer. Then both of them started toward the house.

"Your father doesn't look so good," Tommy Cole murmured. "Has he been ill, Herb?"

Herb Rafton shook his head. "I don't know what it is," he admitted. "He doesn't usually confide in me. I'm the college kid, and I'm not supposed to have any worries."

He started toward the house, and then, changing his mind quite suddenly, turned up the gravel path toward the garden house where Johnny Graham had gone. That look Graham's sister had given him still annoyed him. In college he'd always tried to hide the fact that his father was a millionaire.

Johnny Graham was under the shower when Herb came in. His sister sat on one of the benches across the room. She stared as Herb entered, the expensive white robe wrapped around his body, hair slicked back.

The father, a tall, gray-haired man, stood up, plainly a little embarrassed. He had young Graham's gray eyes and the same jaw.

"Everything all right?" Herb asked.

"We've been paid," the girl said flatly.

Herb Rafton smiled. "I didn't mean that," he assured her. He turned to the father. "Why not stay for the party?" he invited. "It's rather late to start back for the city. You can catch a train in the morning."

Mr. Graham shook his head. "Thanks, son," he said, "but we'd

rather pull out when Johnny's dressed."

Herb shrugged. "We have plenty of room at the house," he urged.

"Look," the girl told him quietly, "we didn't have any right to come down here in the first place, but I wanted to see how you rich lived." She paused, her eyes cold. "Now I know, and I want to get back."

"Is it that bad?" Herb chuckled.

"Sally," the father admonished, "the gentleman's trying to be nice."

"He can't do anything to us now," "We got his money."

"I can sue for slander," Herb grinned. "We have the best lawyers in the country, you know."

"I wouldn't put it past you," Sally grated.

Johnny Graham came out of the other room, slipping on his tie. He smiled and nodded at Herb.

"I'm trying to get you people to stay to the party," Herb told the brother. "So far I'm out of luck."

"What's the party for?" Sally asked suddenly. "Is it your coming out?"

"Do we need a reason?" Herb chuckled. "We own the house."

"I think we'd better run along," Johnny Graham murmured. "This is out of our line, Mr. Rafton." He held out his hand. "Glad to know you, and thanks for the chance to make a few dollars."

HERB SHOOK the older man's hand. For some unaccountable reason he didn't want these three people to leave. This was the other side of society, the wrong side of the track, and he'd had little contact with them before. They seemed very real.

"This fellow could go places couldn't he, Pop?" Johnny said to his father. "See that left jab, and the footwork?"

"I got eyes," Pop Graham smiled. "He could be taught."

Herb walked with them down to the station wagon which had brought them from the railroad station. The chauffeur was waiting in the driver's seat.

"I take in the fights at the Garden occasionally," Herb said to Johnny Graham. "Let me know when you're on."

The pro grinned wryly. "It's been a long time since I was in the Garden," he murmured. "My class is the West Side Club now."

Herb opened the door to let Sally Graham in. "Come again," he invited.

"I'll drop in for tea," the girl scowled. "Make it pink."

Herb shook hands with Pop Graham. Immediately, before the motor started up, he heard a step on the gravel path behind him.

"Slumming, Herb?" a cool voice spoke.

Red-faced, Herb Rafton spun around. June Crowley had spoken softly, but he was sure the three in the station wagon had heard the remark. June had always been his best girl, but there were times when she annoyed him. It was understood eight or ten years back that some day they would marry, and the social set regarded them as a perfect match.

The train whistle in the distance broke the ensuing moment of silence. Then Johnny Graham spoke quietly.

"We'll have to run, Mr. Rafton," he said.

Herb nodded. It was about a half mile to the station and they would make it without any trouble. He watched the car purr down the path and then out the gate at the far end of the tree-lined road.

"You've been neglecting your guests, Herb," June smiled. She took his arm and steered him back toward the lawn.

"There was no need for such a remark," Herb said grimly. "They were decent people, June."

"It was a joke," the tall girl grinned. "Don't be angry, champ."

Herb looked at the ground as he walked back. She wasn't apologetic, and it wasn't a joke. It was just her way—a way he didn't understand, or like.

"I'll get dressed," he said, back on the lawn.

The band was tuning up on the terrace, and a moment later the music drifted toward them. Couples swung out on the smooth-wood floor which had been set up specially for the occasion.

"Hurry back," June said. "I haven't seen much of you tonight, Herb."

Herb Rafton relaxed a little. He remembered that up at Lake Placid for the winter sports she'd been the best of companions. She was an excellent tennis player and swimmer.

"The night's young," Herb grinned. "Be back in a jiffy."

Going up the stairs to his room, he thought Sally Graham, the girl he'd just left in the station wagon. Lake Placid was only a name to her, and she'd probably never held a tennis racket in her hands.

SMITH, THE valet, was waiting for him at the head of the stairs.

"Your father would like to see you in the library after you've dressed," the old man murmured.

"What's up?" Herb asked quickly.

Smith shrugged, and shook his head. "Probably financial worries again," he muttered. "You'd better tell your dad to take it easy, Herbie."

Herb nodded. "I'll give him a bawling out," he chuckled. "The guy must want to own the country."

In the library a half hour later, he found his father sitting with Evans. The lawyer was a thin little man with white hair, but a young face. He'd been the family counsellor for over thirty years.

"Sit down, Herb," Mr. Rafton smiled. "We were just talking about you."

"How was the left jab tonight, Dad?" Herb grinned. J. C. Rafton had been an amateur boxer himself in his younger days, and he'd always encouraged Herb in his lessons, even hiring a boxing professor to teach him the rudiments.

"You're getting better all the time," Mr. Rafton told him. He cleared his throat. "I hope you don't mind if Mr. Evans and I leave tonight, Herb. We have to get in to New York."

"Tonight?" Herb asked slowly. "Is it that important?"

"I'm afraid so," the father nodded. "There is a special director's meeting being held. It—it's an emergency."

Herb Rafton placed his hand on his father's shoulder.

"I wish, Dad," he said quietly, "that you wouldn't worry so much about money, and about the business."

J. C. Rafton glanced quickly at lawyer, Evans, and then back at his son.

"No matter what happens, Dad," Herb went on, "we'll get along."

He walked with his father down to the garage and watched the two drive away in the big limousine.

The party wasn't over till after three in the morning. Some of the guests departed, but most remained overnight. Herb went up to his room, feeling the weariness creep over him now. Besides dancing for two or three hours, he'd fought six fast rounds with a good boxer.

"Father get back?" he asked Smith.

The valet shook his head. "They'll probably stay at a hotel tonight," he explained. He paused. "I won't waken you tomorrow, Herb," he said.

"I guess not," Herb called sleepily. Usually, in the mornings, Smith got him up at seven o'clock, and he went for a run through the woods. Tomorrow, he'd be too tired.

It was high noon when he opened his eyes. The sun was streaming through the windows, and Smith was standing in the doorway.

"Mr. Evans is waiting to see you, Herb," the valet said quietly. "He's on the terrace."

Herb sat up quickly. "Where's Dad?" he asked.

"Mr. Rafton didn't return," Smith told him. He went out.

Herb dressed and went down without eating. He found the lawyer sitting in one of the wicker chairs under a lawn umbrella. He had his brief case on the table before him.

"Dad come back?" Herb asked.

Conway Evans moistened his lips and shifted in the chair.

"I'm afraid, Herb," the attorney muttered, "your father won't be coming back for quite a while."

Herb blinked. He felt himself getting weak. "What happened?" he whispered.

"Mr. Rafton had a nervous breakdown last night," Evans explained, "and we took him to the hospital immediately. His condition is not serious so we didn't think it necessary to inform you till now."

"I've got to see him," Herb mut-

tered, getting out of the chair.

"Not today," Evans said quietly. "He won't be seeing anyone for a few days, Herb. Then he's slated for a trip to the sanitorium upstate."

Herb sank back in the chair. "Is it as bad as that?" he mumbled. "What brought it about?"

MISTER EVANS started to open the brief case. "I'm afraid, Herb," he said slowly, "you're in for a long and painful session with me." He began to take out papers and statements. "Your father was broken last night, Herb," he said grimly, without looking up. "Smashed."

"What—what do you mean?" Herb faltered.

"Exactly what I say," Evans told him. "We were talking about it last night, and the past few weeks. We were talking about you—what to do about you when the crash came." He smiled coldly. "It came a little sooner than your father expected."

"You mean he's through on Wall Street?" Herb asked slowly. The thing didn't seem possible. J. C. Rafton was one of the biggest financiers in the country, and one of the smartest.

"We've been playing margins," Evans explained. "Your father knew how dangerous it was, but he had no alternative. We've had little cash on hand for over six months."

Herb Rafton stared at his hands.

"Your father invested heavily in Rocky Mountain Oil, Herb," Evans went on. "We thought we could pull a coup, but it didn't work, Rocky Mountain Oil went on the rocks last night, leaving your father heavily in debt."

"How bad is it?" Herb wanted to know.

"I've got to sell everything your father has," Evans explained. "House, country place, polo ponies, furniture—."

"And there's nothing left?" Herb murmured.

"After we pay our debts," Evans said, "you'll be quite broke, Herb. I'm keeping enough out to send your father to the sanitorium for six months."

"I guess," Herb said quietly, "this

will be in the papers by tonight."

"It'll make the headlines," Evans told him. "The whole country will know about it in twenty-four hours." He studied Herb carefully. "Your father and I expected something like this, Herb, and we've made arrangements for you."

"Arrangements?" Herb asked.

"There's a job waiting for you in my office," Evans said. "It'll pay well, and if you want to study law on the side, I can give you every opportunity—"

Herb held up his hand. "I appreciate your kindness, Mr. Evans," he murmured, "but for the present I'll have to refuse."

"You've made other plans?" Conway Evans asked.

"I'd like to think things over," Herb told him. "The law doesn't appeal to me."

"You'll have to work somewhere," Evans said dryly. "It's not a case of what appeals to you."

"I'll work," Herb promised, "at the trade I like."

"Trade?" Conway Evans smiled.

"Don't worry about me," Herb said. "I'm over twenty-one, and I know my own mind."

The news broke that night, and Tommy Cole was the first one to reach Herb. He shook hands quietly.

"I'm very sorry, Herb," the man muttered. "This is a shock."

"I called up the hospital," Herb smiled, "and it's not as bad as I thought. Dad should be as good as ever after a six months rest."

"I didn't mean that," Cole said. "You—you're broke, kid!"

Herb Rafton was grinning. "Maybe," he said mysteriously, "it's a good thing, Tommy."

Cole blinked. "Sometimes," he murmured, "you're a queer guy, Herb. I don't think you should have been born with a silver spoon in your mouth. You never appreciated it."

"At times," Herb chuckled, "it's gagged me, kid." He poked Cole playfully in the ribs.

THREE HOURS later, June Crowley was sitting in the living room of the old house on the hill. She had just come home from a walk with her mother, and she was feeling rather weary. But she was also excited, because she had just received a letter from her father, and she was eager to read it.

until your dad gets back on his feet. If you want to, you can take a job in the office with me." He was getting enthusiastic. "You know Dad always liked you, kid, and he'd push you—"

Herb was shaking his head. "Thanks, Tommy," he smiled, "but that's out."

"What—what are you going to do?" Cole mumbled. "Get a push-cart, or sell magazines?"

"I'll figure something out," Herb assured him. "Don't worry about it."

Cole went off on a new track. "What about June?" he asked quietly. "Didn't you plan on getting hitched in the fall?"

Herb's face clouded. "I guess that'll have to be postponed," he muttered. "I don't know how she'll take this."

Cole nodded grimly. "She's not the kind who will appreciate the privilege of living in an apartment house," he stated.

Through the open window of his room, Herb saw the maroon roadster sliding through the gate. June Crowley wore smoked glasses and her hair was tied with a red ribbon. She parked the car on the lawn and then swung toward the house.

"I'll go," Cole murmured. "You fight this out together."

Herb met the girl on the terrace, and then walked with her to a seat under the trees.

"Is it a joke?" June asked tightly. "I saw it in the papers."

"No joke," Herb smiled. "We're flat broke."

She looked at him quickly. "You take it rather lightly, Herbert," she murmured. It was a tone she used when angry, and Herb didn't miss it.

"I don't see any use in crying over it," Herb told her. "There isn't a thing we can do. I'm sure father did his best to hold up the ship, but it's gone down."

"You forget," June Crowley spoke acidly, "that I was interested in that ship."

"I'm not forgetting it," Herb murmured, "but it's one of those things we'll have to make the most of."

"You have plans, of course," June said.

"Yes," Herb told her. He didn't

offer to reveal them.

"As your fiancee," Miss Crowley said, "I believe I'm entitled to know what you are going to do."

"I'm going into the ring," Herb said simply. "The professional prize-fight ring."

June's mouth opened. "Pugilist?" she gasped.

"That's it," Herb said. "A pug."

"I don't believe it," the girl mumbled.

"I go into the city tomorrow," Herb grinned, "to make my first match."

"Isn't this rather juvenile?" June Crowley snapped. "Your playing days are over, Herb." She paused. "You could sell insurance for my father."

"Insurance?" Herb Rafton chuckled. "First it's the law; then then the steel business, and now insurance."

"At least you won't have your nose broken and your senses scattered," the girl told him grimly, "in any of those professions."

"A man has a right to his own profession," Herb said. "I've picked mine."

CHAPTER III

IN THE morning he caught the first train for New York, taking the subway over to the New York Gymnasium. He walked into the office of Mike Dolan, proprietor of the gym. Dolan was the man J. C. Rafton had contacted whenever he wanted a pro sent up for an exhibition match with his son.

Dolan sat behind a battle-scared, rolled-top desk of the 1890 vintage. He was a big, bald-headed man with a pair of pale blue eyes, freckles, and a twisted nose.

Herb Rafton held out his hand. "I'm Mr. Rafton's son," he introduced himself. "I believe you've met my father several times, Mr. Dolan."

Big Mike stood up and grinned. "You the kid's been pushin' around some of my light-heavies?" he chuckled.

"They've pushed me around," Herb smiled. "We want to thank you for sending up such a nice lot."

Dolan nodded. "We have a bunch of good boys workin' out in the gym," he admitted. "I sent some of the best-

behaved. Hope everything was all right, Rafton."

"No complaints," Herb told him. He paused. "I want to ask you a favor."

"Shoot," Dolan said. "As long as it's in my line."

"I want to fight," Herb murmured quietly.

"Okay," Mike Dolan nodded. "I'll send a boy out to your place whenever you want him." He placed two big feet on the desk and lit a cigar.

Herb Rafton leaned forward in his seat, hands clasped. "Not that way," he said. "I mean in the pro ring."

Dolan's feet came down with a bang. His mouth was open. "You're goin' pro?" he gulped.

Herb nodded. "You read the papers, Mr. Dolan," he said flatly. "You know what happened to my father."

"Oh," Mike Dolan muttered. "I kind of forgot that, kid." He looked at his cigar. "So you want to fight pro?"

"I'm in shape," Herb explained. "I can go any time."

Dolan blew out a cloud of smoke. "It'll be a lot different, Rafton," he murmured, "from what you've been havin' in those exhibition matches out at your place. Those boys were soft-pedalin', you know."

"I knew it," Herb said grimly. "I tried to get them to open up, but I guess Dad wouldn't have liked it that way."

"Boxing is a funny game," Dolan was saying. "The only way you get ahead is over some other guy. You have to knock 'em stiff, and walk over 'em. Or," he chuckled, "they'll knock you stiff and walk over you."

"I know what I'm up against," Herb admitted, "and I expect to start at the bottom."

"You'll take a prelim bout?" Dolan asked. "Maybe a six round opener?"

"Anything," Herb told him. "I thought you might have the contacts and could help me out."

"How much you weigh?" Dolan asked.

"One, seventy-two," Herb replied.

Dolan picked up the phone and got a number.

"Sam," he said. "I got a kid down here—light heavy. He's willing to

work in an opener for you—any price." Dolan looked at Herb, and Herb Rafton nodded.

MIKE DOLAN'S feet went back on the table. "This is his first fight, Sam," he said. "He's a college kid—intercollegiate boxer—and pretty good." Dolan grinned and smoked a moment. "You didn't ask this kid's name," he murmured, winking at Herb. "Write it down, Sam. It's Herb Rafton—son of J. C. Rafton."

Herb heard an excited murmur in the phone piece, and then Dolan placed the phone on the stand.

"You're set, kid," he said. "You got an eight-rounder at the West State Club. Sam Devine will fix you up."

"Who with?" Herb wanted to know. He felt his heart beginning to pound. It had been a lot easier than he'd expected, and an eight-rounder wouldn't be the opener.

Dolan shrugged. "Sam said he'd get somebody, kid. He's kind of excited over the thing. You'll probably draw bigger than his main attraction next Friday night."

Herb stood up. "I'm getting a room in New York," he explained. "I'd like to work out here, Mr. Dolan."

"Sure," Mike nodded. "We'll fix you up with a locker, and I'll get a spar mate for you." He paused. "There's one kid I don't like downstairs," he said suddenly. "Stay away from him for awhile. He's bad inside."

Herb waited, standing by the door.

"This guy's an up-state Italian—kid by the name of Genelli, Tony Genelli," Dolan said flatly. "He's been around and likes to pick on new kids comin' in to the gym. He cuts them up pretty bad."

Herb smiled. "I'll stay away from him," he nodded, "if you want it that way."

"I'm throwin' this Genelli out on his ear one of these days," Mike Dolan growled. He held out his hand. "Good luck, kid. I'd like to see you make a go of it." He paused. "Told your Dad?"

"Not yet," Herb murmured. "I'm going over to the hospital now."

"He'll be surprised," Dolan grinned.

"Don't break it too hard."

In a half hour Herb was sitting at his father's bedside. J. C. Rafton's face was sunken, and there was a peculiar light in his eyes.

"So you turned down all the offers," he murmured, "and you're going into the ring?"

"I'm young," Herb said. "I don't have to fight all of my life, but it's something I want to do now."

The father nodded quietly. "I'm the last one to deter you, Herb," he smiled, "but do me this favor. If you find that it's not your game, quit early. I don't want to think of my son becoming punch-drunk."

"It's a deal," Herb agreed. "I won't be stubborn." He went back to the gym to find that Mike Dolan had set up a locker, with boxing trunks and paraphernalia ready for him.

Dolan came down to the bench as he was slipping into the outfit.

"You can work out with the light and heavy bags upstairs," the gym owner said. "You go into the ring at eleven thirty sharp. I run 'em on schedule down here."

"Okay," Herb said. "Thanks, Mike."

"You go four rounds with a kid named Lannigan," Dolan stated. "He's a nice boy, and just startin' like yourself."

HERB STOOD up and Dolan looked at him, approvingly. His legs were well-muscled, and his waist was small. He had hitting power, indicated by the ridges running from the shoulders up to the neck.

"Take it easy for a few days," Dolan advised, "and then rest up a whole day before Friday."

Herb Rafton nodded. As Dolan was going away, he called suddenly.

"What do you know about the Grahams, Mike?"

Dolan came back, face clouded. "The finest people in the fight game," he said slowly. "Pop Graham probably knows more about boxing than any other fight manager in the country. His kid, Johnny, is past the age now; he's thirty-two and he's had his day."

"He had bad hands," Herb murmured.

"Very brittle," Dolan nodded.

"When he was twenty-four he's all set for a title-bout and he gets in that motor-cycle accident. A year later when he's back in the ring again, they kind of forgot about him, and then his hands go bad. He's afraid to hit."

"They pretty badly off?" Herb asked.

Dolan shrugged. "Johnny Graham is picking up coffee and cake money," he said. "He gets a main event now and then over at the West Side fight club, and takes whatever he can get. Pop Graham don't want no charity."

"There's a girl," Herb said.

Dolan looked at him quickly. "Sally's the kid sister," he chuckled. "She and Pop had their hearts set on makin' Johnny the champ. When she was a high-school kid she used to go up to his training camp and cook for him. Took special courses so she'd know what to do. A great kid."

Herb went out on the floor, watched two boys with the heavy gloves pounding away in the ring, and then walked toward the stairway leading to the second floor.

Dolan's Gym was a square-set, two-story building. There were wooden benches around the ring, and a few spectators watching the boys up above them. A lunch counter was at one end, and a row of phone booths at the other. Fight managers hopped in and out of the booths as calls came in.

Upstairs, Herb heard the staccato rap of the light bag, striking the board, and the sharp rat-rat of rope on floor as a boy skipped. He found a light bag in the country and went over to it. Several of the fighters in the upstairs room glanced at him with little interest as he went to work.

Ten minutes with the light bag, and he went over to the heavy bag for two rounds. Dolan had worked out a system with bells. Every three minutes a bell clanged which could be heard all over the gym. The men in the ring went to their corners and the boys at the various bags, took a minute rest also.

At eleven thirty, Herb went downstairs, a robe around his shoulders. He sat on the bench till Dolan signalled to him. A red-haired, thin-

faced kid was climbing through the ropes on the other side. He had a nice grin on his face when Herb went over to shake hands.

"You're Rafton," Lannigan grinned, a little abashed. "Glad to know you."

"It's mutual," Herb told him. "I hear you're just starting also."

Lannigan nodded. "Got a six round opener in three days at the Colony Club," he muttered. "I'm scared stiff."

They went back to their corners and the bell clanged. In a minute of fighting, Herb discovered that Lannigan was a rank amateur. He had a pretty decent build, and he was very strong, but lacked experience.

Herb easily tagged him with long left jabs, and straight rights to the body. He made Lannigan miss with little effort, and Mike Dolan, standing below, grinned.

AT THE end of the round, Dolan nodded, winked at Herb, and walked back toward his office. Lannigan came out for round two, forcing the fight, trying to pin Herb in a corner, and failing constantly.

Twice, after missing punches, Lannigan lost his balance and stumbled forward.

"You'd do better," Herb murmured, "if you'd shorten your punches, Pat, and get your feet up forward when you swing."

Lannigan nodded and smiled. "Thanks, Rafton," he panted. He did a little better after awhile.

Several times Herb spoke to the light-heavy, pointing out faults, and Pat Lannigan was grateful. There were probably two dozen spectators around the ringside when the black-haired man with the thin, wolfish face, and piercing black eyes, came out of the locker room.

Herb Rafton saw him out of the corner of his eyes as he sat on the stool between rounds. The new-comer had a gray and maroon robe thrust carelessly over his shoulders. His neck was thick, powerful. He had a low forehead, the face pointed, nose slightly cracked at the bridge.

The third round Herb again gave Lannigan a few pointers, talking to him in low tones so that it wouldn't

be too evident. Lannigan's efforts at times were pitiful. He had one redeeming virtue—willingness to learn.

Herb came back to the corner at the end of the round to see the dark-haired fighter staring up at him insolently.

"Who's the 'Jim Corbett'?" the man sneered. "I didn't know we had a boxing instructor in the gym."

Herb smiled, but didn't say anything. It was evident that this was Tony Genelli, the guy who was causing the trouble in the gym, and getting in Dolan's hair.

"Knock his ears off, kid," Genelli called to Lannigan when the bell rang again.

Lannigan reddened, the anger showing in his blue eyes.

"Don't mind the guy," he murmured to Herb in a clinch. "He's itching to punch somebody."

Herb Rafton grinned. "This is the place to do it," he joked.

"I don't like taking anything from a guy like that," Lannigan scowled. "But he's plenty good with those gloves."

Herb didn't say anything. He went back to his corner when the round was over and slipped on his robe. Tony Genelli stood on the side of the steps when he came down. The Italian had a glove hanging in his hands. He was twirling it with the string.

"Hey, Show-off," Genelli chuckled. "Like to show me a few of them things?"

Herb Rafton studied him quietly. "I had my four rounds," he said slowly. "That's all Dolan assigned to me."

"I guess that's all you want, too," Genelli grinned. "You're not so dumb."

Pat Lannigan came down behind Herb, face tight, a little afraid, but knowing what was going to happen.

"Don't mind him," Lannigan said quietly. "He's a four-flusher, Rafton."

Herb was walking past Genelli when he saw the glove come up. The up-start Italian swung it by the string, smashing it full into young Lannigan's face. He was grinning as he did so.

Lannigan let out a short cry and staggered back, tears streaming from

his left eye where the thumb of the glove had landed. He regained his feet, ready to fight, but Herb was too fast for him. The rich man's son hit Genelli a short left hand blow to the side of the jaw.

The Italian threw back his head, shook it like a dog, and then plunged in, driving punches to the head and body.

TAKEN BACK by the fierceness of the attack, Herb gave ground, nearly falling over the nearest bench, as Genelli rushed him. He took a left hook to the mouth which brought blood. A stiff right to the body shook him up, but he was straightening out when Mike Dolan roared in from the office.

The big two hundred and twenty pound gym owner broke in between the two fighters.

"That's all, Genelli," he bellowed. "You're through around here."

A special cop assigned to the gym broke through the rear door and ran toward them.

Genelli spat on the floor in disdain. "This dump," he chuckled. "I won't be trainin' in these kind of places anyway in six months."

"Turn in your locker key on the way out," Dolan growled. "We've had enough of the likes of you."

Tony Genelli grinned at Herb. There was no mirth in the grin; it was vivious, pregnant with promise.

"I'll see you around, friend," he said softly.

"Any time," Herb murmured. "I'm not running, Genelli."

"I hope," the Italian said slowly, "we're in a place where you can't run, kid."

When he was gone, Mike Dolan said,

"It's rats like that who spoil this game, Rafton. With all his ability he should be a decent guy, but he's not."

Herb turned to Pat Lannigan who was still nursing his sore eye.

"Thanks for standing up for me, Pat," he said slowly. "I've never had a man do that for me before."

Lannigan smiled through the tears streaming down his cheeks. "I guess he would have flattened me pretty

quick, Rafton, but I didn't want to see you get in trouble your first day here." The redhead picked up his robe and strode toward the other end of the gym.

"Why is that?" Dolan gumbled. "There's the nicest kid in the place and he'll never be any better than a prelim man. A louse like Genelli is born with speed, hitting power and everything a fighter needs. He's a natural."

"He's losing a lot," Herb Rafton said quietly, "but he doesn't know it."

In the afternoon he rented a room within a few blocks of the gym. He looked at it ruefully after bringing his bags from the station. It was small and stuffy, with a view of a red brick wall out of the window.

There was a telephone in the hall which was used by all the tenants. Herb gave the number of Mike Dolan to be passed on to Sam Levine at the West Side Club.

"Sam will want to get in touch with you for the final arrangements," Dolan explained. "He's digging up a man for next week."

Herb got the phone call from Levine at eight o'clock that night. He grabbed a trolley car and crossed over the town to the West Side. The fight club was not a prepossessing place. It was small and dingy compared with the Garden, and seated probably four thousand people.

A rickety wooden staircase led up to Levine's office on the second floor. The squat, round-faced Levine grinned up at him when he came in.

"Recognized you, Rafton," he chuckled. "from your pictures in the paper. "I hope you're as good a fighter as a polo player."

"We'll find out," Herb smiled. He sat in the chair Levine proffered. The matchmaker for the West Side Club had small dark eyes, which were shining now with suppressed excitement.

"I have a fight for you," Levine murmured. "Eight rounds, next Friday night. It's a semi-final, kid."

"Semi-final?" Herb shook his head. "I didn't expect anything like that."

Levine waved a fat hand. "You're a name, Rafton," he grinned. "Why

should I bill you in an opener?"

"Who do I fight?" Herb asked.

SAM LEVINE lit a cigarette with feigned indifference. Then he fumbled with a sheet of papers before him.

"Chap named Genelli," he said finally. "Tony Genelli. Know him?"

Herb Rafton smiled quietly. The build-up had been too casual. Levine knew about the trouble at Dolan's Gym, and he wanted to capitalize on it. He would bill a grudge fight—with Herb Rafton, son of J. C. Rafton, the financier, participating.

"I've heard of Genelli," Herb murmured.

"He's a little tough," Levine smiled, "but Dolan tells me you look pretty smooth, and you've had a lot of experience fighting college guys."

"I suppose," Herb said, "there's quite a difference in the pro ring."

Levine shrugged. "Look at this way, Rafton," he explained. "Suppose I give you some chump in a six round opener. You knock him over, and then you got to knock over another chump before anybody knows you." He paused. "Genelli's not a main event man, but he's getting a name. You beat him and you're somebody quick. Get it?"

"It's logical," Herb admitted. "What do I sign?"

Levine gulped. "Everything okay then, kid?" he asked eagerly. "You get a hundred and fifty. I'll make it two hundred if you win."

Herb nodded. "All right with me," he said briefly.

"Good," Levine smiled. "My card's all made up then. I got Johnny Graham and Bud Horner for the main event."

"Graham?" Herb said quickly.

"He's getting old," Levine admitted, "but he's still smooth."

Herb went back to his room and put through a call to Tommy Cole. He gave his new address.

"You didn't say Park Avenue?" Cole asked.

"No," Herb chuckled. "I said Third Avenue." He told Cole about the match for next week.

"I'm leaving for the Coast Friday

morning," Cole said, a little disappointed. "I wanted to be in town for your first fight, kid."

"You be around for the next one," Herb said. "This affair mightn't look so pretty. I'm fighting a tough baby."

"You can take him" Cole chuckled. "Keep that left working."

Herb found Mike Dolan waiting for him in the morning at the gym. The big gym owner's face was clouded.

"I just got through bawlin' out Levine," he scowled. "He played a rat-trick on me."

"What do you mean?" Herb asked.

"Signing you with Genelli" Dolan muttered. "That's the last guy I wanted you to fight kid."

"I'll take my chances" Herb told him. "Every man has two hands and two feet."

"That louse will use both, too," Dolan snapped. "He knows every dirty trick in the trade, and he's a tough fighter besides."

"I'll watch him," Herb promised. "It's only eight rounds and I'm in good shape."

"Shape doesn't mean anything," Dolan told him, "when a guy sticks a thumb in your eye, or stamps on your foot with his heel."

Herb did his road work in the park, mornings, and worked out for two hours at Dolan's gym in the afternoon. He got a call from June the third day after having settled in New York.

"You forgot about your old friends?" the girl asked coldly.

"I've been busy," Herb apologized. "Thought I'd drop out to see you Sunday."

"If you're too busy," June said, "don't bother."

Herb felt his temper rising. "You must appreciate my position, June," he said quietly. "I have to make a living. This isn't a joke; it's business."

"You had several offers to go into real business," Miss Crowley told him. "You turned all of them down."

"Let's not go into that again," Herb stated.

"We'll all be down for the fight, Friday," she said then.

Herb winced. He hadn't wanted the social crowd at the West Side Club

for his first fight, and it wasn't his intention of telling them about it if he could help it. June had probably wormed the information out of Tommy Cole.

"I'll see you around," Herb said.

CHAPTER IV

HE WAS at the club at seven thirty the following Friday with the fight scheduled for approximately nine-fifteen. Sam Levine had assigned club seconds to him. One of them, a small, bald-headed chap with the hatchet face, nodded as he came in, and then opened his bag to lay out his equipment.

Herb warmed up leisurely as he'd been taught to do before each fight. He shadow-boxed around the room, working up a little sweat, loosening the leg and arm muscles.

After they taped his hands he lay on the rubbing table for a few minutes in complete relaxation. The little dressing room was cramped and rather dilapidated in marked contrast to the gyms in which he'd boxed at State.

There was a transom over the door and it was open. The second prelim was on as he stretched on the table, and he could hear the noise through the transom. The West Side Club seemed to be about filled to capacity.

Sam Levine stuck his head in the door, face shining with perspiration.

"Full house, Rafton," he grinned. "Make it good."

Herb nodded. "I'll try," he stated.

When Levine went out, there was a knock on the door and the second opened it. Johnny Graham stood there in street clothes, a small black bag in his hand.

Herb jumped up quickly and went over with outstretched hand.

"How's it, Rafton?" the pro smiled.

"Glad to see you," Herb told him. "Best of luck tonight."

Graham nodded his thanks and sat down on the lone chair in the room.

"I'm sorry to hear about your bad luck, kid," Graham murmured. "How's your dad making out?"

"He'll get over it," Herb stated. "He's pretty tough."

"You really need the dough now?" Graham asked. "That the reason you turned pro?"

"I'm broke," Herb grinned, "and it feels great."

Graham smiled also. "They gave you a pretty tough nut tonight, kid. How'd that happen?"

Herb shrugged. "I guess they're all pretty tough, Johnny," he admitted.

"Watch this guy's left hook," Graham said. "He's wicked; watch him in the clinches. If he can pull anything fast without being caught, he'll do it."

"So I've heard," Herb said wryly.

Graham hesitated. "It sounds nuts," he said finally, "me saying this, but if there's anything I can do to help, let me know. Pop can fix you up with a few fights. He has plenty of connections, and you can always find your meals over at our Second Avenue place."

Herb didn't smile. He looked at the older man steadily. "I'll remember it, Johnny," he said slowly. "It's mighty nice of you."

Graham went out, and Herb felt the nervousness creeping up on him again. He was walking around the room when the boy came in with the curt statement that he was 'On.'

Wrapping the white robe around his body, Herb passed through the door, the seconds with him. The lights were on in the West Side Club, and heads were turned toward the entrance through which he came.

He saw a man in black and white checkered robe standing in one corner of the ring, head wrapped in a white towel, face swarty, a cold grin around the corners of the mouth.

FANS STOOD up all over the arena to see him as he walked down the aisle. Herb reddened slightly. Sam Levine had built this thing up. He had his club filled, and they were literally hanging from the rafters. The main bout with Johnny Graham participating, was only an anti-climax tonight. The West Side fight fans had come out to see the socialite from the smart set.

He walked quietly down the aisle, expecting a razzing of some kind, but

strangely there was none. These people were from the other side of the tracks, but they respected him, knowing his story. He was taking no soft job to support himself; he was starting out in the toughest of professions, and his first bout was with an efficient and dirty contender.

Herb went through the ropes and over to Genelli's corner. He held out his hand, but Genelli just looked at it. The fans couldn't see what was going on, with Genelli's seconds and manager surrounding them.

"Didn't think you'd show up," the Italian smiled. "You got more nerve than I thought, Corbett."

Herb just nodded and walked back to his corner. Shuffling his feet in the resin box, he looked down into June Crowley's face. They were occupying three full rows of ringside seats—the Westchester County, and Southampton crowd. Many of them were in evening clothes and had already been subjected to a little good-natured razzing from the regular fans.

June looked at him steadily, disapproval plainly written in her eyes. She didn't like this venture; she didn't like the kind of people he was association with in this new profession.

The bell clanged, and the announcer stepped to the center of the ring. Tony Genelli weighed in at one, seventy-five, to Herb's one, seventy-two and a half.

They gave Herb a good hand when he was introduced. He walked out to the center of the ring for instructions. The referee was Georgie Hand, a slight, blond-haired man.

"I'd like this clean," Hand said quietly, looking at Genelli. "Any dirty stuff and I'm giving the round to the other chap."

Herb eyed the man steadily, but Genelli looked at his opponent, that same small grin on his face.

"Break clean when I tell you," Hand said. "Keep your punches up. Go back to your corners and come out fighting."

Herb walked back and handed the robe to a second.

"Get him, kid," the hatchet-faced

man murmured. "The crowd's on your side."

Herb turned around as the bell clanged. With the checkered robe off, Genelli looked bigger than he really was. He was slightly bow-legged, and the legs were very powerful. There was no fat on his face or body. He came in rather low, chin down behind his left shoulder, pawing with his left.

The socialite fought from a stand-up position, copying the style of the old English masters. He snaked out a left and it caught Genelli on the point of the nose, pushing his head back.

A girl with the social crowd up front, let out a little squeal, and the fight fans chuckled. Herb danced away, right hand cocking, left darting out. He wasn't quite prepared for what happened next.

Genelli feinted with his left, and then came in very fast. He charged in like a football player, rushing his man to the ropes. Pinning him there, he started to hit with tremendous power, driving the punches in peculiar sledge-hammer fashion so they would cut.

Herb took a half-dozen in the face before he was able to break out of the trap. A little dazed, he stood in the center of the ring, trying to adjust himself. They didn't fight this way in the college matches; there never had been this eager ferocity.

GENELLI rushed in again, but this time Herb got away from him. He landed a short right to the head, and then dug his left into the body. Genelli got in close, wrestled him to the ropes; threw him off and then plunged in again, hoping to catch him off-balance.

"That's enough of that," Georgie Hand rasped.

Genelli completely ignored the man. He threw a left, and then a right—very fast. The left was short, but the right caught Herb on the point of the jaw, knocking him back a few steps.

He recovered to meet Genelli when the Italian slammed in. He swung a left and a right which drew cheers

from the crowd. They knew he was taking it, but he wasn't running.

The round ended with Genelli still trying to crowd him into a corner. It was the Italian's round.

Round Two, Herb started to find himself. Several times he jabbed Genelli's nose without a return. He was regaining confidence when a terrific left hook to the pit of the stomach sent him to his knees. He remembered, then, Johnny Graham's advice to watch Genelli's left hook. The punch had come up from nowhere.

Georgie Hand started to count with Herb on hands and knees. He got up to the seven before Herb was able to drag himself from the floor. His mouth was open, and he was gasping for breath, but he went into his man swinging.

A left to the mouth split open his lower lip; a right smashed him into the ropes, and then Tony Genelli was on top of him, hammering those sledhammer blows, cutting Herb's face with the edges of his gloves.

Desperately, Herb Rafton tried to hold him off, and get out of the corner, but Genelli was very clever, and much the stronger man now. Unaccountably, Herb felt the sting leave the Italian's punches. He understood from Genelli's smile then. The up-state battler didn't want to end it so early!

The bell rang with Herb floundering on his feet, trying to get inside Genelli's guard. He was still dazed and weak from that smash to the stomach.

Genelli sat on the other side of the ring, watching him with relish as the seconds worked on the cuts.

"That guy's wicked," the hatchet-faced man growled. "You don't have to take it all night, kid. This is your first time out and the crowd knows you got guts."

Herb nodded. "I'll stay up as long as I can," he said quietly. He found himself looking down at June Crowley. The social set seemed very glum, but June was smiling coldly, an "I-told-you-so" expression on her face.

Herb Rafton set his jaw. He heard the warning note and he got to his feet beneath the stool. When the

bell clanged, he bolted from the corner, rushed the surprised Genelli into a corner and hit him three hard blows without a return.

The crowd came up, howling with glee. Genelli got his arms around Herb's waist and pushed him back into ropes. There was a wild melee' on the strands with Herb plunging to break loose and hit.

He lost his balance once and fell forward. Something was jabbed into his right eye and he cried out sharply from the pain. Only when he straightened up, half-blind, with the tears pouring down his cheeks, did he realize what had happened. Genelli had stuck a thumb into his eye.

The Italian was quick to take advantage of this momentary blindness. He came in fast pouring in the punches, smashing herb's back into a neutral corner.

The socialite managed to stay on his feet. He heard the hatchet-faced second howling,

"Hold—hold!"

He got his arms around Genelli's waist, then, and waited till they were broken. Georgie Hand's face was grim, and Herb realized the referee knew what had happened, but hadn't been in a position to see it.

At the end of the round, Herb plodded back to the corner and sat down. He felt his right eye swelling up; his cut lip started to bother him also.

The second said glumly. "You ain't a pretty sight, kid."

Rounds Four, Five and Six, he went down once apiece, but always got up. Genelli let him get away when he came off the floor, and was content to hammer his face to a pulp.

Herb's right eye was nearly closed, and Genelli had started to work on the left. His face was a mass of bumps and bruises with the seconds trying vainly to stop the bleeding. His lips were cut on the inside and he'd swallowed blood which made him sick to the stomach.

"Listen," the hatchet-face growled, "you took enough, kid. Lay down now."

Even the hardened fans called for a halt after the sixth round, and

Georgie Hand came over to Herb's corner.

"How's it, kid?" he asked kindly.

"Don't stop it," Herb mumbled. "Not this one. I've got to stay up."

HAND looked at him and nodded as if he understood. It was a disgrace losing, but a man got some satisfaction out of staying the limit, knowing that he was still fighting when the final bell rang.

They came out for Round Seven, with two to go. Herb had forgotten all he ever knew about boxing. He plunged in with round-house swings, missing ludicrously and tumbling into the ropes. It was becoming a farce.

Genelli clipped him with a left to the mouth; he shot a short right to the stomach which doubled Herb up. He jabbed and hooked with the left, playing with his man as a cat plays with a mouse. The Italian was scarcely marked after six rounds of fighting.

On the ropes, Genelli tried to hold and hit, but Herb broke loose as a cat threw a wild right which caught Genelli flush on the mouth causing blood to trickle down his chin.

The blow enraged the Italian and he went to work in earnest. With a half minute of the round to go, he knocked Herb down with a left to the jaw.

At five Herb staggered to his feet. He saw Gerogie Hand coming in to stop it, and he broke past the astonished referee, hitting wildly at Genelli's head, missing most of the punches, but landing once, a hard shot to the jaw.

The fans roared and Hand shook his head, letting the fight go on. With five seconds of the round remaining, Genelli again floored him a right to the body.

They had to carry Herb back to the corner, but he was ready after sixty seconds rest.

"All right," the hatchet-faced mumbled, "you got three minutes, kid. For a rich guy you got plenty of moxie."

Herb came out with a wild dash to start the round. He touched Genel-

li's gloves in salute, and then tried to get under the man's guard. His legs were tired; he could not see very clearly, but through the haze he located Genelli's swarthy face, and he hit at it. The face never seemed to be where his punches went.

He felt the power in Genelli's counters now, and he realized the Italian was trying to put him away. The canvas scraped his back, and he got up.

Something smashed him in the mouth and he went to his knees, clutching wildly at a hazy rope in front of him. With the aid of a rope, he got up again, not listening to the count.

Hand came in front of him to wipe off the gloves, and then he was past the referee throwing punches at the Italian's face, always missing. He didn't try to hold, and he didn't try to stall. On wobbling legs, he went into his man, taking everything Genelli had to offer.

When the final bell rang, he was on his knees, reaching forward blindly for a rope on which to pull himself up. The count was up to five, but it wasn't a knockout.

The seconds led him back to the corner. He could not see at all now, and the blood dripped from a half dozen cuts on his face.

The two seconds worked over him as he sat limp on the stool. They managed to get one of his eyes open so he could see. The crowd was standing up, cheering hoarsely.

"It's for you, kid," the second muttered. "They know a game guy."

Herb didn't say anything. He looked down at June Crowley, to see her back, as she started up the aisle.

"Let's go," the second said. "We'll do a better job in the dressing room."

THENEY led him up the aisle with the white robe around his shoulders, face unrecognizable. He saw Johnny Graham standing at the head of the aisle, ready to come down for the main event. Graham was wearing the blue robe. His face was very grim.

Behind the fighter were Pop Graham and Sally. Herb looked at the

girl. He tried to grin, but he knew it was probably more a leer than anything else. The grin hurt his lips tremendously.

"You're all right," Johnny Graham said flatly. He slapped Herb's shoulder. Pop just looked at him, a quizzical expression on his face. Herb stared at the girl again. He thought he saw moisture in her eyes.

Then they were leading him to the dressing room, and he had to realize that it was all over, and he'd been terribly beaten in his first pro start.

His stomach started to retch with the blood he'd swallowed. He was scarcely able to make the few remaining steps to the dressing room.

"Lie down here, kid," the hatchet-faced man mumbled. "We'll fix you up before you go home."

They were working on the cuts when a kid brought a telegram. Herb opened it and read through one eye, lying flat on the dressing table. It was signed, "Cole," and it read,

"GIVE HIM HELL!"

Herb Rafton squeezed the yellow slip of paper in his hands.

"He played you dirty, kid," the hatchet-faced second was saying. "He never gave you a chance to get started."

Herb Rafton looked up at the ceiling. "He licked me," he said quietly. "All the way."

"I never seen a guy take it like you," the second told him. "An' you never stopped comin'."

"I presume," Herb murmured, "you have to do more than just come in this game."

He managed to take a shower after, but he was still too worn to get dressed. After the seconds left, he lay down on the table again, trying to figure out his next step. He'd promised his father that he wouldn't stay in the game if he discovered he didn't have what it took. But leaving the fight game meant going into business—taking one of the jobs offered him.

He was still on the rubbing table ten minutes later when the door opened and Johnny Graham looked in. Behind him stood the tall gray-haired Pop.

Herb sat up and grinned, hurting his face again. Graham had the bathrobe over his shoulders; his face was flushed, and there was a small cut over the left eye.

"You win?" Herb asked quickly.

Graham came in, trying to smile, the pain lines around the corners of his mouth.

"Hand stopped it in the ninth round," the fighter muttered. "I broke my right fist again." He held out the hand limply, and then looked at his father.

"He's through," Pop Graham stated quietly. "I'm not sending him out any more with those hands."

Johnny shook his head. "It'll heal, Pop," he muttered. "I'll be as good as new."

"He wanted to on with one fist," Pop said, "but Georgie Hand was too smart for him. He knew it right away. They gave the fight to Horner."

Johnny Graham was staring at Herb, a question in his eyes.

"You put up a tough fight, kid," he said, "but that Genelli was too smart for you. He's been fighting nearly two years now, and he's a cinch to grab the title in another year or six months."

Herb moistened his lips. "I haven't made up my mind as yet," he said slowly. "I promised Dad I wouldn't stick to the game if they kicked me around."

POP GRAHAM sat down on a chair across the room. His gray eyes were serious.

"You're a pretty smooth boxer, Rafton," he said, "and you can hit. With your courage you should do something."

The interest came into Herb's eyes. "What was I doing wrong tonight?" he asked eagerly.

Pop smiled. "Your whole fight was right into Genelli's hands," he murmured. "I could have told you that to begin with." He paused. "Genelli likes the boxers who hit and stay away. You noticed whenever you charged into him he was taken by surprise."

Herb nodded. He was beginning to sit up.

"Then" Pop added, "you don't get your full weight behind your blows. You hit Genelli several times flush on the jaw. If you'd gotten the proper leverage he would have gone down."

"You mean I hit with the arms only?" Herb asked.

Pop nodded. "In every sport," he said, "you need a follow-through. When you punch, keep coming around after the blow lands, bring your weight into it, right down to the soles of your shoes."

"What else?" Herb smiled.

"You have to learn how to slip and roll with the punches," Pop told him. "You pull back out of the way when you dodge the other guy's fists, and then you're not in position to punch when he misses."

Johnny Graham was chuckling. "I went through all this too, Rafton."

Pop Graham was warming to his subject and Herb listened with open ears.

"You dance too high," the older man advised. "Get down on the soles of your shoes when you hit, and then make every punch count. You lose more strength when you miss than if you hit the other man four times."

Herb's eyes were beginning to glisten. "You think I have a chance if I stay in the game?" he asked.

Pop shrugged. "That all depends upon the individual," he stated. "You have a good heart, good body, plenty of brains, and good hands." His eyes dropped when he added the last phrase. "Let's get that fist set, Johnny," he mumbled.

They were walking toward the door when Herb stopped them.

"I need a manager," he said quickly. "and you're losing a fighter, Mr. Graham. Give me a chance."

Pop looked at him steadily. "You want to fight for me?" he asked.

Herb nodded.

"You don't fight guys like Genelli the first time out," Pop told him. "You work in six and eight rounders in small clubs in the sticks. You pick up twenty-five bucks and you meet some pretty rough boys."

"I'd like to try it," Herb told him. "You're on," Pop Graham said. "Take a week off to get over tonight, and then we'll go to work in Dolan's gym."

Johnny Graham was all smiles. "Best of luck, Rafton," he said. He held out his hand. "Stop in and see us tomorrow if you're not busy. Sally will have to approve of you also."

"Okay," Herb chuckled. "I'll be around."

CHAPTER V

IN THE morning he received a short, crisp note from June Crowley. Herb read it grimly.

"Father is considering you for a position as eastern representative in the company," June stated. "Call me up immediately."

Herb stalked out to phone in the hall and put through the call.

"I'm turning down your father's offer," he said when she answered. "Tell him I'm very grateful."

There was a moment of silence. "You mean you intend to keep on fighting?"

"That's it," Herb said.

"Like last night?" June said coldly.

"I hope to improve," Herb Rafton scowled into the mouthpiece.

"Under the circumstances," Miss Crowley snapped, "you may consider our engagement as definitely off." She hung up before Herb could answer.

In the afternoon Herb went over to the Second Avenue address of the Grahams. The house was a three story affair of brownstone, and the Grahams had a small apartment on the top floor.

Herb climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. Sally opened it, smiling.

"Come in, Mr. Rafton," she murmured. "We've been waiting for you."

Herb took off his hat. Johnny came over, his right hand encased in a cast. He held out the left.

"We were talking it over, Herb," the fighter said. "We have an extra bedroom here. If you'd like to take it—"

"I'm not broke yet," Herb laughed.

"I got a hundred and fifty for the Genelli fight."

"You earned it," Sally said soberly. "We were all sorry to hear about your Dad."

Herb nodded soberly. The Grahams had been the only ones to mention his father. The others had been sorry the Raftons lost their wealth!

"You won't be making much dough from now on," Johnny Graham said, "and every little bit helps. Pop thought he could teach you more if you were around all the time."

"All right," Herb said.

Sally looked a little embarrassed. "I guess you got the wrong impression the first time we met, Mr. Rafton," she said quietly. "I thought all right people were snobs."

"The proportion," Herb advised, "is about the same in all walks of life."

HE WORKED out for two weeks at Dolan's and then Pop Graham lined him up for a six rounder in Jersey City. Herb won handily in the fifth round. He was boxing more smoothly, and he had power in his gloves which he'd never suspected. A right hander floored his opponent, Abe Chandler, in the fourth, and the referee stopped it in the fifth.

"One," Johnny Graham chuckled, "and more to come."

The following Saturday Herb went to Passaic for another prelim, winning it on a decision in six rounds. This one Pop Graham wanted to go the limit for the experience.

Conway Evans wrote him a letter requesting that he drop in for a talk. Mystified, Herb showed up one morning in the office.

"You're still in the ring?" the lawyer asked quietly.

Herb nodded. "I'm winning now," he said. "How is father?"

The lawyer shrugged. "Your dad is much better than we expected. The doctors believe he'll be able to get back into the swing of things sooner than six months."

"Can't be too soon for me," Herb enthused.

"To get started in business," the lawyer went on, "he'll need money. He can't go back as an office clerk."

"Won't his friends see him on his feet?" Herb snapped. "He's always helped them."

"J. C. Rafton won't take anything from anyone," Evans smiled. "You know him."

Herb nodded. "From me it would be different—if I had it."

"If you had it," Evans acknowledged. "With fifteen thousand dollars your Dad could go into partnership with a friend of mine in a small brokerage house. With his knowledge he could build it up in no time."

Herb winced. "Fifteen thousand," he murmured. That night he spoke to Pop Graham. "How soon before I can count on a few big fights, Pop?"

The older man looked at him queerly. "Anxious, Herb?" he asked. "It'll be a while." He paused. "Maybe a year—maybe two."

They went on the road, hitting through the small tank towns in the middlewest, with Herb winning steadily, and grabbing a main event in the town of Wiliston outside of Chicago. There were two thousand in the club, and Herb picked up six hundred dollars for his knockout win.

He put through a long distance call to Conway Evans.

"Your father's doing well," Evans explained. "He's straining at the traces now, anxious to get going." He paused. "That partnership is still open, but it might not be in a few weeks. It's the chance of a lifetime for your Dad."

Herb didn't say a nything and Evans went on. "Work is your father's salvation now, Herb. If he's not able to jump into something when he comes out he'll be back on that bed in a month."

Herb came back toward New York, swinging south with the Grahams always winning. He got a main even at the Pioneer Club in New York, stopping Sid Jones in four heats.

MATCHMAKER Lou Barnett of the Long Island City Club stopped in the dressing room when it was over.

"You boys want Tony Genelli?" he asked easily. "Hymie Goldman

says 'okay'."

"He would," Johnny Graham scowled. "This kid will box his ears off in another year."

"If he wins," Barnett Chuckled, "your boy is in line for a Garden bout—the big time."

Herb Rafton moistened his lips. He watched Pop Graham's face.

"A bad beating now," Pop said, "Will put this kid at the bottom of the heap. Goldman knows that. He wants him now before he's ready."

Back home Herb said to the older man. "You don't think I'd go so well against Genelli?"

Pop Graham rubbed his jaw and shook his head. Johnny Graham came into the room and stood with his hands in his pockets.

"What's the hurry, Herb?" he asked curiously. "You're plenty young."

Herb shrugged. Sally Graham was in the kitchen door, taking in the last part of the conversation. He saw the puzzled look in her eyes. He'd become good friends with this girl during the past few months. They'd taken in shows together.

"What's the matter, Herb?" she asked when they were alone.

"What do you mean?" the fighter parried.

"Why do you want to fight Genelli?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I want to get back at him for the licking he gave me."

"No," she said. "I know you better than that." Johnny Graham came in, grinned at them, waited for Herb's answer.

"Maybe," Herb said lamely, "a man gets tired of fighting for chicken feed."

Johnny Graham didn't say anything. Later in the evening Pop Graham approached him on the subject.

"You really want Genelli?" the older man asked quietly.

"You're the manager," Herb said slowly. "I don't like to cross you, Pop."

Pop Graham smiled and slapped Herb's shoulder. "Forget it, boy," he murmured. "I never said you couldn't whip Genelli, but I didn't want to

take any chances of having you go through the thing you had the last fight."

Herb blinked. "You mean you're going to get Genelli?" he asked.

Pop nodded. "Genelli," he said slowly, "and the champ after him."

CHAPTER VI

THEY SIGNED two days later for the Long Island City Club, with Lou Barnett all smiles. Herb was to get three thousand for the night's work—a flat guarantee.

His hand trembled slightly as he signed the paper. One good match after the Genelli fight would give him the fifteen thousand he needed.

They had a supper out that night after the signing ceremonies, and Herb noticed Sally was very quiet. Pop and Johnny seemed to be having a good time, but the gayety seemed forced.

It wasn't till the next afternoon when Herb went down to Dolan's Gym that he had an inkling of the trouble.

Mike Dolan met him in the locker room and sat down on the bench as Herb slipped into his togs.

"So, you got Genelli again," the gym owner muttered. "I don't like it, kid."

"Pop's going to work with me," Herb pointed out. "It won't be like the last time."

"I hope not," Dolan stated. "It'll go bad with Pop if it is."

Herb had been tying his shoelaces. He looked up quickly. "With Pop?" he muttered. "How come?"

Dolan stared at him queerly. "Didn't you figure it out, kid?" he asked. "With Johnny Graham through as a fighter you're Pop's meal ticket. He's been building you up very carefully because he knows if you go under he's through in the fight game also."

Herb sat up. He'd noticed in recent months that the Grahams didn't seem to be buying new clothes, and that Pop's only suit was getting threadbare.

"Johnny kept them going all along," Dolan explained. "He picked up his dough in the small clubs, and

he was glad to go out to your place for an exhibition bout when I offered it to him."

"I didn't think of that," Herb said slowly.

"I can't figure out a smart manager like Pop Graham signing you with Genelli," Dolan growled. "It don't make sense. He's chopping his own head off."

Herb Rafton picked up his robe and stared at it. He felt a little sick for the moment, but the papers were already signed. Now he realized why Sally had looked at him with the question in her eyes. He'd literally forced Pop into getting him Genelli. If the upstate Italian licked him badly—,

For two weeks Herb worked out at the gym, driving himself at a feverish pitch to get into the best shape of his life. A week before the fight Pop Graham looked at him as he sparred with Johnny in the ring above.

"That's all," the old man said. "You're getting stale, Herb. Take a day or two off. Rest up."

Herb went into the dressing room with Johnny Graham. He felt a little tired and he was below his usual weight.

"We don't want you to leave your fight in the gymnasium," Johnny grinned. "You're working too hard, Herb."

"I've got to win this one, Johnny," Herb muttered. He was beginning to realize the issues at stake. Not only his own father depended upon him now, but the Grahams also.

"Don't let it worry you," Johnny said. "It's another fight, kid." He didn't say it with assurance, and Herb remembered the fighters statement a while back, that a severe beating often times completely ruined a man.

TO MMY COLE called up that afternoon, having just arrived from Chicago.

"Long time—no see," Tommy chuckled. "How about coming up to our place, Herb?"

Herb Rafton hesitated. It had been a long while since he'd visited with the rich, but strangely enough he hadn't missed it. Only a few, like

Cole, had been his intimate friends. June Crowley hadn't written or called since she'd sent her engagement ring back.

"All right," Herb consented. "I'll get the four-thirty train, Tommy."

"I'll be waiting," Cole yelled. "I hear you got that tough Genelli again. Knock his ears off."

"Sure," Herb grinned. "Just like that."

Cole was waiting when the train pulled into the station. He was alone, and dressed in sport clothes, seemingly a little more excitable than usual.

"It's good to see you, Herb," Tommy yelled, shaking hands. "Pile in and we'll get back."

They rode back to the Cole estate in the station wagon, Tommy talking all the way about his work, throwing questions at Herb concerning the recent western trip.

"I've been trying to keep tabs on you," Tommy chuckled, "but you sure move fast."

"We had a lot of one night stands," Herb smiled, "just like a stock company."

The station wagon moved through the gate and down the line of elms to the Cole mansion. It was nearly six-thirty in the evening, and Herb heard the soft strains of dinner music.

He looked at young Cole queerly. "What's the band for?" he asked slowly.

Before Tommy could answer, the "mob" broke out the front door and ran across the lawn toward them. There were about twenty-five, mostly young people, all the old acquaintances.

"What's this?" Herb muttered.

"Surprise!" somebody yelled in the rear. June Crowley was the last one in the group. She sauntered toward the wagon, a small smile on her face.

"You forget?" Tommy chuckled. "This is my birthday, kid, and mother wanted to throw a little party. I thought it would be nice to have you meet the folks. They're anxious to see you."

"Sure," Herb said quietly. "It's nice of you, Tommy. I didn't bring a present." He was looking at June, conscious of that fact that he felt no

emotion toward her, and glad of it. He shook hands all around, nodding to June politely.

"I had to invite her," Cole whispered on the side. "It wouldn't have looked right, Herb. Hope you don't mind."

"It's your party," Herb told him. He touched Cole's shoulder. "Remember, Tommy, I'm in training, and I can't stay too long."

Cole's face fell. "I thought we'd have one of the old time get-togethers" he muttered. "Why not stick around tonight and go back to New York in the morning? One night won't ruin your career."

Herb grinned. "All right, Tommy," he smiled. "I'll stay around, but don't pass me any drinks."

"I'll brew some lemonade for you, specially," Cole yelled.

There was dancing on the terrace afterward, and June Crowley came over after the third number.

"You still dance, Mr. Rafton?" she asked.

"Why not?" Herb said.

They didn't have much to say. She didn't ask about his fighting and he was glad when it was over. The entire evening was boring for him. He had to keep a smile on his face and ward off questions about the ring. They were the same light-headed crowd he'd always known, most of them supported by their parents, or holding down lucrative jobs by virtue of connections.

It wasn't till nearly two o'clock when Herb managed to excuse himself and go upstairs. He'd had another dance with June to finish the evening, and then, finding himself the only sober man in the place, drifted out of the party.

IN THE morning Cole was all apologies.

"I guess I had a little too much last night, kid," he said. "Have a nice time?"

"It was nice meeting the folks again," Herb commented. He didn't say that he wanted to meet them after this. Compared to the Grahams of Second Avenue, the social crowd had nothing.

Following Pop Graham's advice, he took the rest of the day off, lounging on the estate, playing a game of tennis with Tommy in the afternoon. It was five o'clock when he boarded the train for New York, and nearly seven when he walked into the apartment on Second Avenue.

Pop and Johnny were gone, but Sally was in the living room reading the paper. She got up when he came in and nodded coldly.

Herb stared after her. On the way he'd been thinking of the girl, wondering how she was. It had been months since he'd been away from the Grahams for more than twenty-four hours.

Johnny came in an hour later, and didn't have much to say. He looked Herb steadily, the coldness in his eyes.

"How was the trip?" the fighter asked.

"Pretty good," Herb acknowledged. As Johnny was turning away, he grasped him by the shoulder. "What's the mystery, Johnny?" he asked quietly. "Your sister wouldn't even speak to me."

"You blame her?"

Herb looked at him in surprise. "I don't get it, Johnny," he muttered.

The brother picked up the newspaper Sally had dropped. "You read this?" he asked, face grim. "We think a lot of our girl, Rafton."

Herb stared at the paper. It was opened to the society page and he saw his picture in a little square in the corner. It was an old picture, one they had used many times when he was a nationally-known polo player.

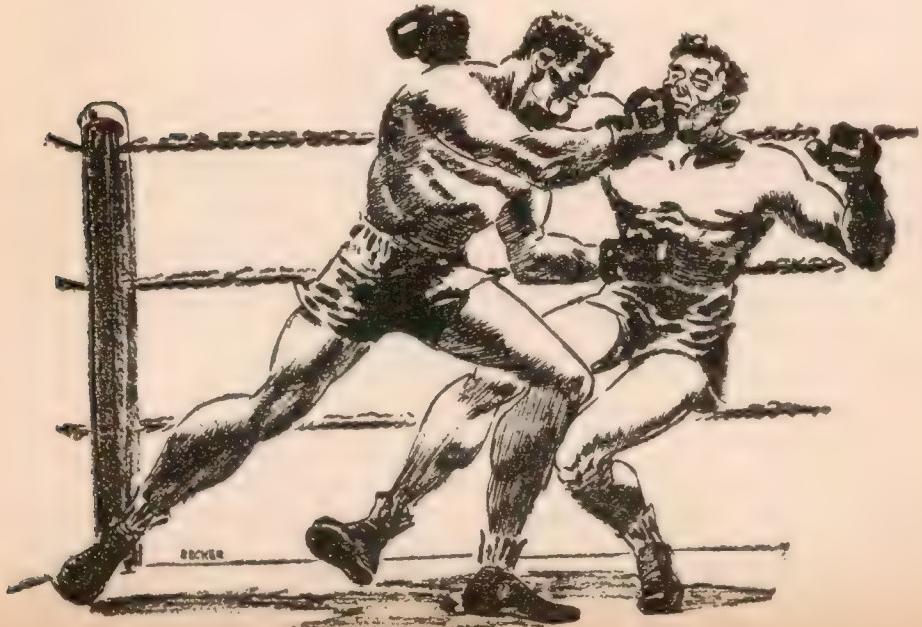
Herb read the little notice beneath the picture. It was to the effect that Herb Rafton, the socialite pugilist had been to a party given by Tommy Cole. He'd been accompanied by his former fiancee, June Crowley.

Herb stared at the notice and then looked at Johnny Graham.

"Is that the reason why you want the big dough so quickly?" Johnny asked bitterly. "Maybe you're getting a little tired of our class, kid."

"No," Herb mumbled. "You're all wrong, Johnny."

"Here's something you didn't know," Johnny snapped. "Pop got you that fight against his better judgment because he heard your father needed money to get started in



business. I suppose that was the bunk too."

HERB'S eyes widened. "You mean Pop knows about my father?" he asked weakly.

"We were wondering why you wanted to get ahead so fast," Johnny scowled, "because you weren't that way in the beginning. Sally got in touch with your father's lawyer. That was why Pop let you go against Genelli. He knows the chance he's taking."

Herb sat down in a chair. "Get this straight, Johnny," he said slowly. "There's no truth in that statement. Miss Crowley was at the party, but I didn't know it was going to be a party, and if I'd known she was to be there, I'd have stayed home."

"You mean this guy's talking through his hat?" the fighter asked.

"They need something to write about," Herb told him, "and that's a juicy bit of gossip. I scarcely saw the girl last night."

Johnny Graham stared at him steadily. "That's all right with me, kid," he said after awhile. "I don't know how Sally will take it."

Herb didn't see her the next day when he went down to the gym with Johnny. He came back in the afternoon to find a message for him, in Sally's handwriting. He read it slowly and then handed the paper to the brother.

"Miss Crowley called up," Herb muttered. "She invited me to a house-party Saturday night after the fight."

Johnny took the slip of paper and read further. Sally had gone over to her aunt's place in Brooklyn, and intended to stay for a few days.

"How about this?" Johnny asked bleakly. "I thought it was all over."

"It is," Herb said, "as far as I'm concerned."

"So she had your phone number and she calls up," Johnny stated.

"She must have gotten the number from Cole," Herb explained. "I'm not going anyway." He sent a note by return mail, politely declining the invitation. He had an idea what June had said to Sally over the phone, and he

wanted to make the letter nasty. He thought better of it.

"She must have made some remarks to the kid," Johnny Graham muttered. "Nice friends you got, Rafton."

"I apologize for some of them," Herb said quietly. "I'll do anything I can to make amends."

Johnny shrugged. "She'll probably get over it," he stated.

Pop Graham said little about the matter. "She's young," he told Herb, "and she hasn't had any affairs. It's natural that she should take this pretty hard."

CHAPTER VII

HIN THE GYM they worked out two more days, taking off the day before the fight. Herb was down to a hundred and seventy even. Pop looked at him and shook his head.

"You're too fine, Herb," he murmured. "I'd like to see you more relaxed."

"I'll loosen up when the bell rings," Herb promised. There was too much at stake tomorrow night and he knew it. Genelli would be going into the ring, regarding the match as just another fight with a man he'd whipped terribly once before.

"Forget about everything tomorrow night," Pop Graham urged. "Watch Genelli's left hand and try to work that counter I've been teaching you."

Herb tried to smile. It wouldn't be as easy as that. He'd see his father's face in front of him; he'd have to remember that Pop Graham had risked this match in order that Herb might have a crack at the big money quickly. Pop would be washed up if this, his last good prospect, faded out.

They sat in the dressing room at eight-thirty, with one of Genelli's handlers watching Pop tape Herb's hands.

"The boys are layin' four to one on Tony," the Genelli man grinned. "That's the smart money."

Herb didn't say anything. He watched Pop Graham's long fingers working. Johnny Graham stood a few

FORTUNE IN HIS FISTS

feet away, hands in his pockets.

"All right," Pop ordered when the bandaging was finished. "Warm up, Herb."

Herb started to shadow-box around the room. The Genelli man left, and then Hymie Goldman came in.

"Any loose dough around here?" the fat manager chuckled. "I'm givin' three to one."

"I heard it was four," Johnny Graham said morosely.

"Three on a knockout," Goldman grinned. "We don't figure on this thing going the limit."

"It did the last time," Johnny told him.

"Tony dogged it most of the way," Goldman smiled. "He'll be goin' all out tonight."

Goldman left, and Herb moved over to where Johnny was standing. He smashed at the air several times, loosening the muscles, working up a little sweat.

"Sally come back?" he asked softly.

"She was due in tonight," Johnny said.

"She coming to the fight?" Herb wanted to know.

"I wouldn't know," Johnny Graham stated. "They know her at the gate. She'll be down front if she comes."

"Watch that left hook," Pop Graham warned. "Keep on your toes, and stay away a few rounds."

Herb nodded. That was the strategy they'd worked out. They had to make Genelli miss in the early rounds and get him careless. After that it was up to Herb to find an opening.

"He'll probably try some dirty stuff," Pop added, "if he's behind. Watch him every step."

"Okay," Herb said. Conway Evans had called up two nights before, and he'd told the lawyer to proceed with the negotiations.

"You have the money?" Evans asked, amazed.

"Not all of it," Herb replied, "but I will in a month or five weeks." He had the thing all figured out. The Genelli fight would give him a couple of thousands, and a Garden match

(Continued On Page 126)

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(Continued From Page 125)

would provide the rest. If he took Genelli, the Garden matchmaker would be after him within twenty-four hours.

"Before I do anything," Evans said dryly, "I'll wait till I hear from you again."

At quarter of ten they went down the aisle with the lights up and the crowd howling even before it started. Some of them had seen the first fight and they knew this was to be another grudge match, with Herb a supposedly vastly improved boxer.

"We got Harry Dawes for tonight," Johnny Graham said. "He's good."

Herb saw the third man in the ring standing in a neutral corner, waiting for the principals. Tony Genelli climbed through the ropes, sporting a new purple and white robe with the word "Genelli" inscribed on the back.

Standing in the corner, shuffling his shoes in the resin box, Herb looked down at the faces in front of him. He heard Tommy Cole's yell, and then he spotted June Crowley sitting behind Cole.

Johnny Graham saw her too, but didn't say anything. The "crowd" was present again—the same set-up as the first Genelli fight. Herb saw another face off to his left, sitting alone, watching him. He looked at Sally Graham steadily. There was no emotion in her face.

They were out in the center of the ring with Tony Genelli grinning at him, and Harry Dawes talking steadily, calmly.

Herb listened to the familiar instructions.

"Go to your corners," Dawes stated, "and come out fighting."

Genelli had a final remark before turning away.

"Where'd you get up the nerve, kid?" he asked. "This is gonna be a pleasure."

Herb ignored him. He handed the robe to Johnny Graham and gripped the ropes with both gloves.

"Your fight, kid," Johnny muttered.

Herb nodded. The Grahams had done all they could for him, and the rest was up to himself. He looked

again at Sally Graham. Then the bell clanged.

GENELLI came out in the familiar crouch, feinting fast with the left hand. Herb remembered those peculiar cutting blows the Italian threw at his opponents. He felt again the pain.

Genelli was short with a left and Herb hooked him sharply to the chin. He was boxing high on his toes, but not retreating as in the last fight. Genelli loved a fighter who backed away on him.

"The left!" Johnny Graham yelled. "The left, Herb."

Herb Rafton jabbed with the left, and then jabbed again. He made Genelli miss a right, and then he stepped in fast with a left and right to the Italian's face.

The crowd roared in appreciation. Herb eyed his man steadily. This one was scheduled for fifteen rounds, but he knew it wouldn't be going the distance. Both of them had calculated on a short fight and were working accordingly. Pop Graham's strategy was to come on fast after the fifth, and if possible end it soon there after.

Genelli came in low, hooking for the body with the left. Herb took the blow on the elbow. He backed away once, his body touching the strands. Before he could get away Genelli was on top of him, face eager, eyes shining, throwing punches.

A left glanced off Herb's jaw, and a right landed flush on the cheek. Hymie Goldman screamed from below, but Herb recovered and hooked his own left to Genelli's body, stopping the attack. He knew what would happen if the Italian ever got him on the run like the last fight.

Genelli attempted another left and Herb beat him to the punch, stepping in fast with lefts and rights to the head, driving the Italian back toward the ropes. Tommy Cole was up on his feet, yelling.

The round ended with both men in the center of the ring, slinging punches. They continued to hit after the bell, and Harry Dawes had to break it up.

Johnny Graham led Herb to the cor-

BIG BOOK SPORTS

ner and sat him down.

"You'll have to watch that guy now," Johnny murmured. "He knows you won't be an easy mark, and he'll try to pull something fast."

"I'll be careful," Herb said.

Across the ring Hymie Goldman was talking excitedly to Genelli. The Italian stared at Herb, the grin gone from his face.

The warning note sounded, and then the bell. Herb came out easily, left hand extended. He was slightly the taller man, with a longer reach. Twice he jabbed the left into Genelli's face without a return.

In a clinch he felt Genelli's gloves trying to get up at his face, and he remembered that thumb. He broke with a wild flurry of punches before Dawes could get between them.

Feinting with his left, he came in very fast with the right to the body which made Genelli gasp. Another right to the same place definitely sent Genelli toward the ropes.

"Get him!" Johnny Graham roared.

Herb plunged in with the left to the head. He saw Genelli's own left coming toward his body, and he knew it had been a trap. The Italian landed flush at the break of the ribs with the left hand.

As Herb tried to back away, a little sick to the stomach, Genelli followed him, stepping on his toe, and lashing out with a right at the same time. The right missed by a fraction of an inch.

Herb felt the pain in his left foot. He tried to hold off his man with the left, but Genelli was on top of him, chopping at his head, rushing him toward a neutral corner.

"Hold!" Graham yelled.

Herb Rafton fell into a clinch wrapping his arms around Genelli's waist. The Italian dropped down low to shoot a left to the body. He straightened up suddenly, the top of his skull smashing against Herb's cheekbone, cutting it open.

The warm blood slid down his cheek and dropped to his chest. Genelli stepped back for a fraction of a second to review his handiwork. The butting job could be considered an accident, but Herb knew it wasn't.

(Continued On Page 128)

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(Continued From Page 127)

BLIND with rage, he plunged in with a wild right which went around Genelli's neck. The Italian hooked him to the body with the left and then knocked him to his knees with a short right.

Herb got up immediately and was knocked down again with a left to the jaw. Only then did he realize the foolishness of the thing. This was becoming a replica of the last fight.

On hands and knees he listened to the count, glancing up at the clock once and noting that they had about forty seconds of the round to go. At eight he climbed to his feet, permitted Dawes to brush off the gloves, and then waited for Genelli to come in.

The Italian was grinning again, head down between his shoulders, gloves weaving. Herb lasted out the round and walked back to his corner unsteadily.

"How's it?" Johnny Graham asked anxiously.

Herb looked down at Pop Graham below. The older man nodded encouragingly.

"That cut bad?" Herb whispered as Johnny worked on the cheekbone.

"Pretty deep," the second said quietly. "I don't know if I can stop the bleeding, Herb."

Herb smiled grimly. "That means it'll have to end pretty soon," he muttered, "before Harry Dawes decides to step in."

"Genelli will try to work on that cut," Graham said. "He'll keep it open all night."

The warning horn, and Johnny climbed back through the ropes. One of the corner of his eyes, Herb saw the man making his way toward Tommy Cole's seat.

The bell clanged and he had to go out. Genelli rushed fast from the opposite corner, trying to pin his man against the ropes. Herb stabbed at him with a left, and then lashed out hard with lefts and rights to the face.

Genelli gave ground, and the crowd gave Herb a hand. He'd been game in the other fight also, and they liked

it, but Tony Genelli had won.

In a clinch Genelli tried to come up again with his head, but missed this time. Herb hit him in the face with a left hook as Genelli wrestled him into a corner.

Looking over Genelli's shoulder, Herb saw Johnny Graham whispering to Tommy Cole. Then Cole got up and pushed his way to Sally Graham's seat a half dozen yards away.

Herb stared as Harry Dawes came in between to break the fighters. Johnny grinned at Herb and shook his fist, indicating that everything was all right.

Genelli came out of the clinch, only to drive in again with his left for the body. Herb held him off, trying to watch Tommy Cole at the same time. Cole was in the aisle, kneeling beside Sally's chair, talking rapidly.

Coming back to the corner at the bell, Herb saw the smile on the girl's face.

"Thanks, Johnny," he murmured. "It was nice."

"It's better to get things straight-end out," Johnny Graham chuckled. "Now get this guy."

The cheekbone was open again, and Dawes came over to the corner to look at the wound.

"I'm all right," Herb told the man.

"I have to be careful," the referee stated. "If anything happens I'm the guy who's responsible."

JOHNNY GRAHAM was worried when the referee went away.

"He won't let it last much longer," he growled, "if I can't stop this bleeding, kid, and that cut is very deep."

Herb leaned back against the ropes. He watched Genelli quietly.

"We'll try to make it now," he murmured.

The bell, and they went out to the center of the ring. Genelli followed the old pattern, hooking with the left to the body. Herb partially blocked the punch. He took a right on the side of the face which sent him reeling into the ropes.

Genelli's eyes began to gleam again. He shot a left and then a right, hooking the punches toward the body

driving his man toward the ropes. Herb retreated steadily, trying to ward off the blows.

He fell back into the ropes, snatched at a strand, and then went down awkwardly. Harry Dawes started to count, getting to six before Herb got to his feet again.

Genelli came in, cutting at Herb's face. He missed the left, and then tried the right. He didn't see Herb Rafton's own right hand driving up from the side.

Herb let go with everything, the punch landing flush on Genelli's jaw and knocking him halfway across the ring. Herb was on top of him like a panther, winging punches into the Italian's face. The ruse had worked perfectly. Genelli had been wide open for that right hand shot.

A left to the jaw sent Genelli reeling into the ropes. Another right dropped him on hands and knees. Herb walked to the farthest corner and waited.

Dawes picked up the count from the knockdown time-keeper. Genelli was shaking his head, looking stupidly at Hymie Goldman. Herb listened to the noise outside the ropes. He knew he had to remain calm. The round was half over and Genelli mustn't be allowed to get away.

"Four," Dawes chanted. "Five, Six—Seven—",

Tony Genelli got up at eight and moved in, both fists cocked. He threw a left which Herb ducked. A right caught Genelli flush on the jaw and he went down again. Dawes picked up the count. It went up to seven this time.

Herb glanced at the clock. If Genelli kept climbing to his feet until the round was over, he might come back strong after the minute intermission.

Dawes wiped off the man's gloves, Herb stepped around him. He feinted with the left, getting Genelli to lift his guard. Then the right went home, straight to the body, an inch above Genelli's belt.

The Italian dropped face forward, both hands clutching at his stomach, mouth wide open. Dawes counted

him out as he was groveling on the canvas.

THEY WERE all in the dressing room ten minutes later, Tommy Cole hoarse, red-faced. Pop and Johnny Graham at Herb's side, helping him off with the gloves.

Mike Dolan came in to congratulate him.

"Jeff Henley is outside," Dolan grinned. "He wants this kid for the Garden next month."

Johnny Graham went to the door and came back a moment later. "There's somebody else outside," he murmured. "You interested, Herb?"

Herb Rafton sat up straight. He pushed past the brother and Tommy opposite the door, having gotten by the policeman at the end of the corridor.

"Sally," Herb said slowly. "I'm sorry about the whole business."

"Why should you be sorry about beating that baboon?" the girl smiled.

"I—I mean the other thing," Herb stammered.

"There's no other thing," Sally Graham grinned. "I was a fool."

"A very, very sweet fool," Herb Rafton said softly. "I'd like to marry a fool like that."

"It'll be your funeral," the girl whispered.

"You mean my wedding," Herb grinned.

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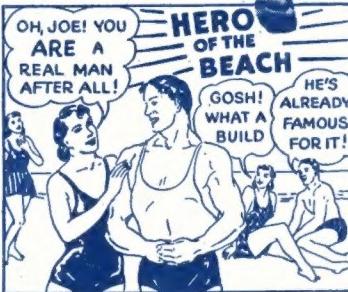
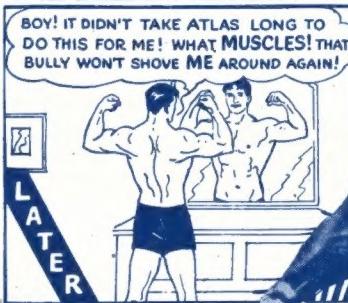
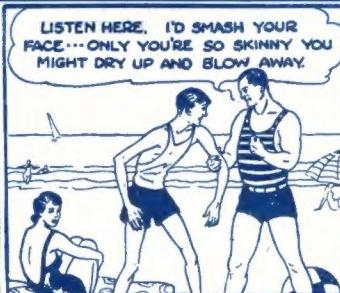
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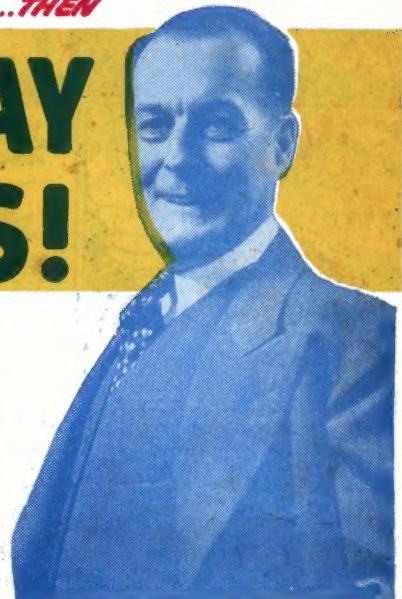
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